

The Aftermath of
Seven Minutes in Eternity:
William Dudley Pelley
and the
Silver Shirts

by

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Introduction

The two decades between the end of the First World War and the start of the Second witnessed world-wide developments seemingly unparalleled in any other period of history. The end of the Great War ushered in a new way of life that was strikingly different from what had been known before. This change was felt in most areas of human existence. Great prosperity and bitter depression, technological and social advances and a feeling of the decline of personal significance, the uncertain promises of a new age and the awesome threat of totalitarian Fascism and godless international Communism -- all these factors helped make this period unlike any that had gone before.

With the great changes affecting the American people came a break-down in what had been considered traditional values and a sense of futility and of the meaninglessness of life. Some sought meaning by asserting traditional values and beliefs, while others looked for new systems to meet the changing times. The economic collapse of the Depression heightened the intensity of the search for some system of belief to provide a solution to a situation that seemed to threaten the country with stagnation, or worse.

Some met extreme conditions with extreme remedies. There were those who felt that the Depression was the result of corruption in the economic system which had to be cleaned out, and others who felt the system itself had to be altered. In this context of discontent new approaches were taken up, some manifesting themselves in the forms of protest movements. Such

an approach, providing an answer to the search for meaning and a solution to the economic crisis of the times, found expression in an organization known as the Silver Shirt Legion of America.¹ The basic philosophy and specific beliefs of the Silver Shirts formed a self-consistent world view that ended the search of many for a meaning in life. Spiritually based as it was, it provided the comfort of faith along with an economic system to meet the problems of this world.

Central to the organization was its founder and Chief, William Dudley Pelley. It was on the strength of his ideas and the force of his personality that the movement was based. Pelley believed that after long floundering he had found meaning in life. For those who had not yet done so, he professed pity. He felt that

the poor befuddled human race was one great human miasma of buffeted, terrified little children, bamboozled by quacks, played upon by theology, made frenzied by uncanny experiences to which it in no wise had the key. Could a man devote his life to any more worth while meritorious calling than fearlessly exploring such Grand Canyons of human knowledge?²

Pelley decided to devote his life to this. The development of his movement into the political organization known as the Silver Shirts was a natural extension of this, for it too answered such a need.

¹ Also variously called the Silver Legion, the Silver Shirts of America, the Silvershirt Legion, and the Christian Party (1936). Its members were known as Silver Shirts, Silvershirts, Silver Rangers, and Silver Legionnaires. This study will follow the form used by the organization for specific periods: 1933-34, Silver Shirts; after 1934, Silvershirts. When speaking of the organization in general over the years, the style of the popular press and the Congressional hearings will be used: Silver Shirts.

² William Dudley Pelley, The Door to Revelation, (Asheville, 1939), p. 334.

Combining a belief in powerful spiritual forces from the life beyond, a plan to incorporate the United States, and a concept of an international Jewish-Communist conspiracy, the Silver Shirts had an unusual outlook on the human condition. They proposed to purge American institutions of the supposed elements of debauchery that seemed to have infiltrated them. In many ways their program had the aspects of a crusade.

The activities and beliefs of the Silver Shirts, as well as public reaction to them, must be considered in proper historical perspective. During their years of existence, the Silver Shirts were often involved in violent controversy. The subjects with which they dealt aroused strong feelings, making difficult a dispassionate view of their ideas and programs. With the passage of time it is possible to consider the situation, and specifically the nature of the Silver Shirts, with greater objectivity. Such a consideration is needed.

It is not a simple thing to determine the purposes and activities of the Silver Shirts during their seven years of existence. There is a conflict between what they apparently believed themselves to be doing and what outside observers said about them. In addition, contemporary accounts of the movement were generally in the form of exposés rather than objective studies. Because of a certain scarcity and unreliability of relevant material, this study has had to rely largely on the writings of the Silver Shirts themselves. Such material formed the basis for most of the magazine accounts extant, so that they are in general only questionable secondary sources.

In addition to this printed material from the Pelley presses, a fair amount of information was obtained in interviews and conversations with some people formerly associated with the movement. A former member in the State of Washington was particularly helpful in furnishing information and loaning material on the subject. I also spoke with Pelley's son-in-law, with Mrs. Pelley and with an assistant, all of whom have been associated with Pelley since the 1930's. They too proved helpful. Also interviewed were two men outside the movement. One had been a neutral, if not friendly, observer, who had gone to several meetings in the State of Washington; the other observer is now Executive Director of the Community Relations Committee of the Jewish Federation-Council of Greater Los Angeles. These interviews have helped provide greater insight into the ideas and operations of the Silver Shirts.

In order to present most effectively the various aspects of the movement and its impact on American life, this study will first consider the chronological development of the Silver Shirts as an organization, dividing this narrative into what may be seen as three phases. Though they held a generally consistent single body of belief throughout their history, the Silver Shirts reflected certain changes in the nature of the organization through changes in approach. These differences are not absolute; it was only a matter of certain tendencies becoming more strongly apparent at given times, a change in emphasis rather than a complete change in character. A sharp distinction is somewhat artificial, but it provides a useful guide in understanding these tendencies as they evolved. Within this framework will be presented the account of

the movement's origins, growth and development. Later chapters will deal with the details and the sources of the specific doctrines that guided its members, the backgrounds and possible motivations of Chief William Dudley Pelley and his followers, and the relation of the Silver Shirt movement to the rest of the world, including similar movements in the United States and abroad.

Because of the importance of the figure of William Dudley Pelley as the major force in the movement, much of this study will be centered around him. Writings by and about him form the core of the source material, and it was largely his personality that made the Silver Shirts the organization that it was. In a search for meaning and answer to life's mysteries, people can go in many directions. Some may tend to find an answer in a conspiracy theory of history and in occult research, but it takes some force of organization to channel these tendencies into a positive single body of beliefs. Pelley had this force.

Chapter One: The Silver Shirts as Mystics

Before there was ever a concrete political organization known as the Silver Shirt Legion, the spiritual beliefs and concepts which were to influence the thinking of the Silver Shirts had been largely formulated. These ideas, growing out of the spiritual experiences of one man, formed the basis for what was to emerge in 1933 as a political and economic association. For three years before this, there existed a movement, an organization of sorts, based solely on the quasi-religious ideas that would underlie many later developments. Because of the overlap of ideas, organization, and, in many cases, members, this early period must be considered as the first of three phases in the development of the Silver Shirts.

In this sense, the Silver Shirt movement had its origins in May 1928, in a small house in Altadena, California.¹ Magazine and screenplay writer William Dudley Pelley was living there as he worked on a novel. On one fateful night he went to bed as usual and slept well for several hours. About three or four in the morning he felt "a physical sensation which I can best describe as a combination of heart attack and apoplexy."² He was convinced that he was dying. It seemed to him next that he had left his body, and he was aware of new surroundings in some other world, where he encountered happy people in an "environment of life permeated with an ecstatic harmony".³ After a brief time in

1 This account is based on Pelley's article "Seven Minutes in Eternity", as it appeared in The American Magazine CVII:3 (March, 1929) and it was later reprinted in pamphlet form, together with an "Aftermath" and a sketch of the author's life.

2 Pelley, "Seven Minutes", p. 7 (This is the magazine paging).

3 Ibid., p. 8.

this other world,⁴ he returned to his earthly body, certain that what he had just experienced had not been a dream.

The episode was not closed by this return, for he "brought something back with me from that Ecstatic Interlude -- something that had interpenetrated my physical self and which suddenly began to function in strange powers of perception."⁵ Some days later, while reading Emerson, he experienced a spiritual contact that altered his being.

A cascade of pure, cool, wonderful peace was falling down from somewhere above me and cleansing me . . . I was not the same man I had been a moment before! . . . I knew that I had acquired senses and perceptions that I could never hope to describe to any second person . . . I had unlocked hidden powers within myself . . .⁶

After this he came to feel a strange inner peace and a new attitude toward life. He gave up smoking, coffee, tea, alcohol and meats. His temper and nerves, formerly serious problems in his dealings with others became calm. His life was changed, and he saw a "universe that seems filled with naught but love, harmony, good humor and prosperity."⁷ (This optimistic view was later modified.)

At the time of this experience, Pelley was a moderately successful writer of short stories, novels, and screenplays.⁸ Originally a native of New England, he was born in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1890, the son of an itinerant Methodist minister. Raised in virtual poverty, he was forced to drop out of high school to help his father in the paper manufacturing business.⁹

4 "from seven to ten minutes my own conscious entity that is Bill Pelley, writing-man, slipped over on the Other Side" (Ibid., p. 9.)

5 Ibid., p. 139.

6 Ibid., p. 141. *Italics Pelley's.*

7 Pelley, "Seven Minutes", p. 144.

8 In later years, he estimated his income at this time was around twenty-five thousand dollars a year.)

9 Pelley, "Seven Minutes", p. 140

The young Pelley seemed to have had a love for printing and publishing.¹⁰ Before turning to the writing of fiction he had been a newspaperman, acting as editor and publisher of the Chicopee (Massachusetts) Journal, the Wilmington (Vermont) Times, and the St. Johnsbury (Vermont) Evening Caledonian, as well as feature writer for the Springfield (Massachusetts) Homestead and police reporter on the Boston Globe. Since 1917, he had been under contract to write short stories for The American Magazine, a popular monthly with a circulation of around two million.¹¹ Something like eighteen stories of his appeared in that magazine alone by 1928.¹² Other of his stories and articles were carried by such magazines as Red Book, Collier's, and Liberty. A trip that he made as a YMCA and Methodist Centenary representative to Japan and Siberia in 1918 served as the basis for a series of articles in Sunset.¹³ On his return, he began work on his first novel, The Greater Glory, which eventually sold an estimated 20,000 copies.¹⁴ His second novel, The Fog, sold over 100,000 copies, it was estimated.¹⁵ White Faith, a short novel serialized in Red Book, was turned into a notion picture entitled The Light in the Dark, starring Lon Chaney. Pelley's work on this film was responsible for his going to Hollywood.¹⁶ He spent the years from 1924 to 1929 mostly in California, writing screenplays for motion

10 Pelley, The Door to Revelation, p. 23.

11 Circulation estimate based on the claims of The American Magazine in several of its issues.

12 Count from Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature.

13 Sunset, Vol. 42 and 43, 1919. See Bibliography.

14 Pelley, "Seven Minutes in Eternity and Its Aftermath", pamphlet (New York, 1929), p. 54. Pamphlet henceforth referred to as "Aftermath".

15 Ibid., p. 55.

16 Ibid.

pictures starring such people as Chaney, Hoot Gibson, and Tom Mix.¹⁷ During this time, he also established and operated "The Pelley Press", a printing and publishing plant in New York, and Hi-Hat Magazine, later The West Coaster, in Hollywood, as well as running the Pelley and Eckels advertising agency in Los Angeles.¹⁸ He also continued to write short stories for The American Magazine and other publications. It was while he was at work on the last installments of The Blue Lamp, which was serialized in Collier's, that he spent his "seven minutes in eternity".¹⁹

His written account of the experience was featured as the lead-off article in the March, 1929, issue of The American Magazine, with the name William Dudley Pelley and "Seven Minutes in Eternity" prominent on the cover. This article was a definite change of pace from Pelley's previous writing which had consisted mostly of short stories about a newspaper editor in the mythical Vermont town of Paris.²⁰ The "Seven Minutes" article gave an account of his dying experience and later spiritual contact, as well as a brief account of his life up to that point, showing the

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 56-57.

¹⁸ Pelley, "Aftermath", pp. 56-57.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 58. The novel appeared in Collier's between May and July, 1928.

²⁰ In March, 1918, The American Magazine, after printing several of his stories, had run a full page picture of him and a caption which had read in part: "Mr. Pelley is a new writer who has made a great success. His first story was mailed to a magazine in May, 1915. Since then he has sold over eighty stories. He is thirty-one sic years old, is married, and lives in Bennington, Vermont, where the 'home folks' call his office the 'Bennington Short Story Mill.' He has owned and operated a country newspaper. Most of his stories are stories of small-town life" (The American Magazine LXXXV: 3, p. 10).

frustrations and failures he had faced, and the significance of his mystical experience in light of his earlier feeling that his "life was a ghastly mess."²¹ The circulation of the magazine at that time was around 2,250,000; Pelley estimated that from two million²² to ten million²³ readers saw this article. He later said that there was a phenomenal response to the article in the form of mail which "assumed proportions analogous to that of Col. Charles Lindbergh after his epochal flight to Paris."²⁴ This mail expressed the deep, even desperate, concern of thousands for the revelation set forth by Pelley; many stated they had had similar experiences themselves. The recognition of the spiritual need expressed in these letters prompted Pelley to continue his psychic research.

After this response, The American Magazine published three of Pelley's stories and a novel in serial form in 1929.²⁵ Later in the year he undertook the writing of a novel, characteristically set in a small Vermont town, dealing with the promise of this new-found mysticism. This was Golden Rubbish, appearing that fall.²⁶ About this time, Merle Crowell left the editorship of The American Magazine, and the new editor seemed to want no more of Pelley's spiritual writings. "Forthwith my long association with The American Magazine ended."²⁷ He devoted

21 Pelley, "Seven Minutes", p. 140.

22 Pelley, Door, p. 334.

23 Pelley, "Aftermath", p. 33.

24 Ibid., p. 34.

25 "Woman Across the Street" (April), "Higher Summons" (May), "Life is to Find Out" (June), "Dark Happiness" (July-October, 1929).

26 The title came from one character referring to mysticism as "rubbish". Another replies "Yes, but a golden sort o' rubbish t' some of us..." (Pelley, "Aftermath", p. 43).

27 Pelley, Door, p. 335.

himself to the transcribing of information that he was receiving from higher planes; in 1929 he stated that he had between 2000 and 3000 pages of material thus far typed out.²⁸

Pelley later stated that it was during this period that he received a significant prophecy concerning the future course of his activity. This prophecy was not mentioned in his writings for several years, but it has been accepted by his later followers as the first real glimmering of the Silver Shirt movement and is often referred to in its literature.²⁹ The prophecy began by predicting the coming stock market crash and Depression, then told Pelley:

Within a year or thereabout you will find yourself at the head of a great spiritual movement that shall spread across this nation. Within two years or thereabout, you will find yourself sitting with the heads of government behind the government in Washington. There you will learn the most intimate details of the Great Conspiracy against Christian lives and institutions. . . . In three years or thereabout, you will find yourself at the head of a national vigilante organization, a quasi-military force, which you will project. . . . There will come a time in this nation when Christian Constitutionalism shall hang by a thread. . . . A young Austrian . . . painter . . . is coming to the head of the German people. . . . His work is not as yours, for his is strictly political . . . Yours is economic, but spiritual as well. . . . The day that this man ascends into the chancellorship of the German people, do you take it as ³⁰ your time signal to launch your organization in America!

This prophecy and its implications were not to be referred to directly in Pelley's writings until the actual announcement of the founding of the Silver Shirts in 1933. However, certain elements in his writings during the intervening years can be seen as

28 Pelley, "Aftermath", p. 45.

29 For example, Liberation III: 4 (February 18, 1933), p. 7.

30 Pelley, Door, p. 337-338.

relating to some larger plan. In his account of the "Aftermath" of the Seven Minutes experience, he states "I have taken down a 400-page book on Political Economy . . . advanced in context and knowledge."³¹ He began publication of his own spiritual, mystical magazine, The New Liberator, in New York in late April, 1930.³² Even in the early issues of this magazine, there were certain political overtones in the presentation of spiritual precepts. The April, 1931, issue carried this message from the spirit world:

We are giving you the complete exposition of a new World Order -- a religious, social, and political metamorphosis -- building by a new terminology what is the essence of a reconstructed society, not conceived by a few men after their own whims but by those who are planning the New State from the higher vantage points of Time and Space.³³

This monthly periodical was "The Magazine of Earthly Illumination from the Higher Worlds".³⁴ Each issue carried this note: "The contents of this magazine, unless otherwise designated, were received 'clairaudiently' via the Psychic Radio, from Great Souls who have graduated out of this Three-Dimensional world into other areas of time and space."³⁵ The early issues were primarily concerned with spiritual problems, such as "How to Protect Yourself from Devils" and "What Happens When You Pray?"³⁶ In a series of articles entitled "Why I Believe the Dead Are Alive", Pelley told of his own mystical experiences since the 1928 Seven Minutes episode. The July, 1931, installment in the series proclaimed "I

31 Pelley, "Aftermath", p. 42.

32 Pelley, Door, p. 344.

33 "What Definite Program of Change Lies Ahead for the Human Race in the Present Generation?", The New Liberator I:5 (April, 1931), p. 200.

34 The New Liberator II:2 (July, 1931), cover.

35 Ibid., 1931-1932, p. i.

36 Ibid., I:7, 8 (June, July, 1931).

Have Revealed the Beginning of a Program of Colossal Events to Continue Until 1957".³⁷ This was part of an increasingly political tone in the magazine; it was going beyond a purely spiritual approach to life and was incorporating its spiritual principles into the embryo of a practical program.

In May, 1931, Pelley undertook a further extension of this work by launching The League for the Liberation. (The word "liberation" was of great importance to the entire movement. It signified "liberation from Fear, liberation from Ignorance, liberation from Pain, Poverty, and Spiritual Bewilderment, liberation from the horrors of war, liberation from Evil and all its social illusions".³⁸) Something like The League had been mentioned in several of the early issues of The New Liberator as "Liberator Study Clubs";³⁹ these home study groups were intended for further consideration of the precepts taught in the magazine. To aid these groups in their studies, Pelley printed programs of services to be followed in the weekly meetings. These programs, or scripts,⁴⁰ as they were called later, were mailed out once a week to leaders, the Chaplains, for each group. The Chaplain would conduct the weekly services of these Liberator Assemblies, by reading the script aloud to those present.⁴¹ The service began with an address by the Chaplain and the invocation. Then "A New

37 Ibid., II:2 (July, 1931), pp. 90-94.

38 "What Definite Program of Change", op. cit., p. 219.

39 Ibid., p. viii.

40 These were the Pink Scripts, dealing with spiritual matters, as distinct from the later Blue Lectures (Educational), White Lectures (Personal Problems), Silver Scripts (Social and Economic), and Golden Scripts ("Master Messages of Sacred Preachments"). (This information from the back cover of one of the Blue Lectures.) These were printed on Pelley's press or mimeographed; available at New York Public Library.

41 Pelley, Door, p. 356.

Sermon on the Mount", composed in Biblical style, was read, and followed by the current week's Script. After that came a message on "The Lesson's Significance", and the Benediction. The content of these services was similar to the basic ideas expressed in the magazine; the first number of the series stated this:

Never before in the history of humankind have great masses of men been so spiritually hungry, so restless under theological fiat, so ready to receive knowledge about this earthly estate in which all of us find ourselves. Unless this is a world of absolute chaos there must be reasons for these mystifying changes.⁴²

In all, sixty-seven of these weekly scripts were mailed out to local Liberation Assemblies and home study groups during 1931 and 1932. The operation was financed by collections taken at the meetings, "to pay any costs of hall, publicity, and the printing and mailing of the Scripts themselves." Any additional money was divided equally between the local leader and Pelley's office "to finance more promotion."⁴³ These procedures were in many respects similar to those of the later operation of the local Posts of the Silver Shirts. It was later estimated that at its largest, The League for the Liberation had consisted of 476 Assemblies, some with as many as five hundred to a thousand persons in attendance.⁴⁴ In June and July, 1931, The New Liberator listed one hundred six Liberator Assemblies, plus eighty-six home study groups.⁴⁵

To expedite business matters, Pelley had formed Galahad Press, Inc., a corporation through which he published The New

42 "What Five Hungers Cause Men to Enter Life?", Title One, The Pink Scripts, reprinted by the Foundation Fellowship.

43 Pelley, Door, p. 356.

44 ibid., p. 357.

45 "Liberator Group Meetings", The New Liberator II:1, 2 (June, July, 1931), vii-viii.

Liberator. One hundred shares of common stock were divided equally among Pelley and two women employees.⁴⁶ Preferred stock was issued and offered for sale to the readers of the magazine.⁴⁷ This move was to cause him much trouble later.

In the fall of 1931, the offices of The New Liberator were moved from New York City to Washington, D. C., and the publication became weekly, published "by the Galahad Press, Inc., 11 West 42nd Street, New York City, for the League of Christian Economists, 1019 Fifteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D. C."⁴⁸ The first issue of The New Liberator Weekly began with this introduction:

This is the Strangest Magazine in America! . . . it is (not) an occult or Spiritualistic periodical . . . Nor is it a publication devoted to psychical research. It is a weekly magazine expounding the times through which we are passing in the light of what is known through the medium of the higher spiritual senses.⁴⁹

In the same issue, Pelley explained why the magazine had changed format and why it had been moved from Manhattan to Washington. He had received instructions through his clairaudient senses that his mission could be best accomplished by setting up headquarters in Washington, D. C., where sources of information about world events would be more readily available to him. In the past, he was told he had been

publishing material irrelevant to your mission. To continue on the line to which you have begun would make you a notorious metaphysical teacher and nothing more. That is not your mission . . . Yours is one of practical ministration in mundane affairs, metaphysically declined . . .⁵⁰

46 Pelley, Door, 353-354.

47 The New Liberator, I:6 (May, 1931), and later issues.

48 Ibid., II:4, (November 7, 1931) i.

49 Ibid., inside front cover.

50 Pelley, "The Liberator Is Published Weekly from Washington", Ibid., p. 167.

This new approach produced articles that made reference to "Dark Forces" controlling the Nation in this time of Depression, Dark Forces which were soon to be defeated in a combat with the "Christ peoples", if only these forces of light would awaken to the danger.⁵¹ This theme was continued in the next issue with the charge that the Depression was "being prolonged for selfish profit and the attainment of unlawful ends against society," and a call for "an aroused Christian public . . . to preserve its social structure from international marplots."⁵² The following issue charged that "The United States of America . . . (and) every so-called Christian country on earth is being run at this moment by a vastly different set of individuals than is suspected by those who are not behind the scenes."⁵³ This theme was to become more dominant and explicit in the months and years ahead. Articles such as "Japan's Dilemma in the Far East" stressed the idea of a coming conflict between the "White Nations" and the Dark Forces controlling Russia, China, and the League of Nations.⁵⁴

The magazine continued to carry articles of a more purely spiritual nature, but these were being overshadowed by the politically-oriented writing. In the December 19, 1931, issue, two articles with important implications for the future of the movement appeared. One presented the view that Christ was not a Jew, as demonstrated by certain factors in the history of the Israelites.⁵⁵ The same issue also carried the first of an

51 "Is a Divine Miracle 'Around the Corner'?", The New Liberator Weekly, II:7 (November 28, 1931), pp. 223-225.

52 Ibid., II:8 (December 5, 1931), pp. 251-253.

53 "The Marplots Rely on Your Ignorance", Ibid., II:9 (December 12, 1931), pp. 264.

54 Ibid., II:8 (December 5, 1931), pp. 241-243.

55 "Did You Know Christ Was Not A Jew?" Ibid., II:10 (December 19, 1931), pp. 298-301.

important series of articles dealing with the Great Pyramid as a record of all past and future events.⁵⁶ This was a significant element in the beliefs and later development of the movement.

In January, 1932, the magazine again became a monthly, with the new name of Liberation, subtitled "A Monthly Magazine of Instruction from Sources Behind or Above Mortality." The offices of The League for the Liberation continued in Washington, and Galahad Press was still in New York City.⁵⁷ The February issue of Liberation, however, showed the address of Galahad Press as Asheville, North Carolina, and carried as its lead article a statement of a prospective "College of the League of the Liberation" to be established in Asheville that summer. This college was to teach the doctrines of the League in the fields of "Religious Science", "Psychic Research", "Criminology", and "Christian Economics".⁵⁸ Such a college had been projected earlier, in one of the weekly scripts of the League,⁵⁹ but this was the first mention of it as an actual institution about to be established. Pelley later accounted for the move as having been inspired by the tentative gift of land and buildings by one of his supporters in Asheville. When the offer was later withdrawn, he had already committed himself to a local operation, The Biltmore Press, to print the magazines and other material of the organization,⁶⁰ and for that reason stayed in Asheville anyway.

56 "The Great Pyramid Proves Bible Prophecy", The New Liberator Weekly II:10 (December 19, 1931), pp. 302-305.

57 Liberation II:11, p. 1 (January 1932).

58 "A City Set on a Hill", Ibid., II:12 (February, 1932), pp. 360-365.

59 The Twenty-Second Script, "The Master Script Ordering the Beginnings of Definite Action". Available New York Public Library.

60 Pelley, Door, pp. 370, 385-386.

While negotiations for his prospective college were in progress, Pelley began issuing the Confidential Bulletins, "a weekly letter service on economics", from Washington. Pelley later referred to them as his "first public utterance on the Jewish Question."⁶¹ The New Liberator and Liberation had given several hints as to the identity of the Dark Forces and had printed articles dealing with mysterious European bankers⁶² and currency control⁶³ but had not specifically referred to Jews as such. It was several months before anti-Semitism became an explicit part of the program.

By early April, Pelley had incorporated the Foundation for Christian Economics in North Carolina as a non-profit corporation, for the purpose of conducting the school.⁶⁴ He opened an office in Asheville about this time, making arrangements for its establishment as "an institution for training in a new order of economics."⁶⁵ It was finally arranged that the clubhouse of the Asheville Club for Women would be rented for the use of the school.⁶⁶ On July 1, 1932, the move of offices and staff to Asheville was completed,⁶⁷ and classes at Galahad College began on July 5.⁶⁸ Some forty full-time students were enrolled at the

61 Pelley, Door, 373-374.

62 "To Whom Were You Referring, Mr. Hoover?", The New Liberator Weekly, II:4 (November 7, 1931).

63 "Why Do You Have A Money Problem?", Ibid., III:1 (March 1932), 33, 35.

64 Pelley, Door, 384.

65 "Asheville Chosen Seat for Economics School", Asheville Citizen, April 2, 1932. This article, as are most of my newspaper references, is from a clipping file, therefore no page number is given.

66 "Asheville Club To Be Used By Pelley School", Asheville Times, June 2, 1932.

67 House Committee on UnAmerican Activities, Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities: Hearings, 76th Congress, 3rd Session (1940), p. 7317. Referred to in later footnotes as Dies Committee Hearings.

68 Pelley, Door, p. 388.

start of the nine week course of study, for which each paid one hundred fifty dollars tuition. A descriptive folder listed three general courses of study: ethics, taught by Pelley; spiritual economics, taught by Dr. James A. Edgerton, and psychics, taught by Dr. Henry M. Hardwicke.⁶⁹ Pelley himself gave many of the lectures. He covered the "Unwritten History of the World", including such subjects as the culture of Atlantis, the meaning of the Great Pyramid, and the threat of Jews throughout history.⁷⁰ The idea behind the series is well-expressed by this statement from the first lecture: "There is a vast unwritten history of the world that academic institutions do not dare to explore because the subsequent revelations would cast down and demolish the powers of the great hierarchies that keep such institutions in existence."⁷¹

Although originally intended to hold classes permanently, Galahad College proved impractical to operate beyond the nine-week summer session. A correspondence course replaced it.⁷² Pelley's talks on the Unwritten History of the World were printed up into the series known as the Blue Lectures and mailed out as part of the Extension Fellowship of Galahad College, which later became the Liberation Fellowship. The publication of the magazine Liberation was suspended.

The close of 1932 marked the end of the predominantly spiritual phase of the movement. The political ideas which had

69 "Galahad College Opens Summer Session Here," Asheville Citizen, July 6, 1932.

70 "For What Are We Searching to Solve Life's Enigmas?" Blue Lecture, Title 1, back cover. Sample titles: "Why Hebrews Are Necessary", "The Ghastly Meaning of the Book of Esther". Available New York Public Library.

71 "For What Are We Searching?", p. 11.

72 Dies Committee Hearings, p. 7205.

been creeping into Pelley's writing were soon to manifest themselves as an important part of the organization of Silver Shirts. The metaphysical beliefs were not forsaken; it was a matter of greater emphasis on things temporal. Certain spiritual precepts and beliefs continued to guide members as in the past, but other elements came to dominate the activities of the new organization.

Chapter Two: The Silver Shirts as Vigilantes and Economic Radicals

As an active organization during the next few years, the Silver Shirts displayed a two-fold nature, characterized by militant anti-Communism and vigorous advocacy of changes in the American economic structure. The United States was in the midst of the Great Depression, and many people were desperately seeking a solution to the conditions of the time. The Silver Shirts tried to provide a solution with their program of incorporating the United States. With their self-consistent world view, they gave lost people something to believe in and a concrete enemy to fight against. During this period, they appealed to the individual who felt himself trapped and exploited by the evils of an oppressive system. Anti-Semitism was an outgrowth of this; the Jews were considered to be the main force behind the system, as well as plotters of world revolution. It was to combat these imagined evils that the Silver Legion was first formed.

Pelley may have begun to conceive of such an organization during the last few months of 1932. George Anderson, treasurer and business manager of the Foundation for Christian Economics from October 1932 to July of the following year,¹ later testified before the McCormack Committee investigating unAmerican activities that Pelley began talking of the forming of a "Militant organization" soon after Christmas, 1932, although no name was given to it at that time. The "Pyramid date" of January 31 was important.² Pelley's account is that he had not made any such

¹ House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, Investigation of Nazi Propaganda Activities and Certain Other Propaganda Activities: Hearings, 73rd Congress, 2nd Session, (1934), No. 73-D.C.-4, pp. 246-248, 258. Referred to in later footnotes as McCormack Committee Hearings.

² Ibid., pp. 251, 253; Liberation III:4 (February 18, 1933), p. 3.

plans until the night of January 30, 1933, when he saw newspaper headlines announcing the elevation of Adolf Hitler to the position of German Chancellor. Remembering the 1928 prophecy about the Austrian house painter as a time signal, he stated, "Tomorrow we have the Silvershirts!"³

Whatever the basis for inception, the Silver Shirts were launched on January 31, 1933. Liberation was reactivated, once again as a weekly magazine, subtitled "A Journal of Prophecy and the Higher Fraternity". Its size and format, if not its ideology, were similar to that of The New Republic. The February 18, 1933, issue, the first in several months, proclaimed the coming of the Silver Shirts. Liberation was described as "the Weekly Journal of the Silver Shirts of America, the active civic organization of the League for the Liberation."⁴ In articles entitled "Whence this Sound of Marching in Morning's Mystic Gray?", "The Silver Shirts are Gathering", "Great Pyramid Prophecy Comes True on the Dot!...", "Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War", and "The Real Liberation now Begins", the idea of the Silver Shirts was presented. The organization was projected as a "great Christian Militia",⁵ standing for "America, gracious, wholesome, tolerant, but America vigilante (sic) from foes from within".⁶ No specific program was presented here; the closest the writing came to an actual statement of purpose was this:

We are the Silver-Shirted LIBERATORS who would liberate our people from the thralldom of alien cartels and conspirings, from the duress of money barons as well as of gangsters,

³ Pelley, Door, p. 392.

⁴ Liberation III:4 (February 18, 1933), p. 12.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

who propose to show our strength by the open massing of our manhood.⁷

This issue also contained a three-page article identifying Jews with Communism ("The assertion has been made in responsible quarters that Sovietism is 92 percent Jewish in character."⁸) and praising Hitler for his program restricting the Ash'kanazim Jews. A distinction was made between Ash'kanazim and Sephardim Jews on grounds of alleged racial and psychological attributes: the Ash'kanazim were charged with being "that branch of world Jewry that looks upon Hebrewism not as a Religion but as a World State of universal materialistic and temporal power."⁹ This amounted to a positive identification of the Dark Forces referred to in earlier issues of Pelley's magazines. The theme of the article was woven around the idea of Pyramid prophecy, specifying the date of September 16, 1936, as an especially significant one in the years ahead. Reference was also made to Pelley's 1929 prophecy foretelling the rise of Hitler.

Subsequent issues of Liberation went on to present more fully the idea of the Silver Shirts and to condemn what they saw as a threat to the American way of life. Asserting the need for action, and denying that the movement was revolutionary, the magazine stated "These are the days of a great and willful deception and debauchery."¹⁰ A picture of medieval Crusaders dominating the front page further emphasized the concept of the movement as a spiritual campaign to recapture a debauched America.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Great Pyramid Prophecy Comes True on the Dot", Liberation III:4 (February 18, 1933), p. 3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Men Fighting for Public Order are Not Revolutionaries!..." Liberation III:5 (February 25, 1933), p. 1.

"Clean Your Institutions, Don't Overthrow Them" directed an article presenting a further exposition of Silver Shirt principles.¹¹ The Silver Shirts proposed, said a later article, "the Liberation of mankind Spiritually, Educationally, Ethically, Economically, and Financially". This combined the spiritual teachings of the early Liberator Assemblies, the "unwritten history of the world" as first presented at Galahad College, and the recognition of threatening conspiratorial forces with a "practical program of world economics that leaves no room for the debaucheries of the predatory international banker, the creation of wars by pernicious munitions makers, or racial cartels that operate as a unit through all governments."¹² This last point, the economic program, was soon to become more significant.

On March 18, 1933, Liberation announced the publication of "a small 32-page brochure roughly outlining what the metamorphosis of our present government is to be, and what the incoming Christ Government is to comprise."¹³ This booklet was entitled "What Manner of Government is the Christ to Set Up?", and presented the basic form of the economic system advocated by the Silver Shirts. Essentially, this entailed turning the United States into "a Great Corporation, with its citizens its only Common Stockholders by right of their nativity of naturalization."^{r1} These common stocks would pay a yearly dividend of around one thousand dollars apiece to all citizens to "supply them with the necessities of life, food, clothes, and shelter, and forever remove the Hunger Pressure

¹¹ Liberation III:6, p. 1.

¹² "The Five Points of Liberation", Liberation III:6, p. 12.

¹³ "Have You Suffered Enough to Listen to the Plan?", Ibid., III:8, p. 1.

from them." Preferred stock would also be issued as "incentives toward initiative, industry, ambition, and thrift". National production would be geared to consumption. Taxes, interest, rents and the use of currency as money would be abolished, currency to be replaced by cheques drawn on the one Federal Bank. This was to be a "Christian Democracy, in which . . . legislation . . . cannot become law until it has been passed upon by a vote of 51 per cent of the citizenry to whom it applies." All this was to be established "by lawful Constitutional Amendment."¹⁴ It was "neither Socialism nor Communism, but an entirely different principle in human government which endured in purity for 300,000 years in Atlantis"¹⁵

This booklet, the publication of which was announced in the Asheville Citizen as a pamphlet predicting the Millenium,¹⁶ was sent to the readers of Liberation in March.¹⁷ Later in the year, it was used as the first chapter of an expanded exposition of Christian Democracy called No More Hunger, which presented the plan in greater detail. In this, Pelley was designated as "Chief of the Silver Legion."¹⁸

To promote the ideas expressed in the publications, an organizational structure for the Silver Legion had to be set up. This began with the establishment of local units on a skeleton basis in various areas throughout the United States.¹⁹ Individuals

¹⁴ Pelley, "What Manner of Government is the Christ to Set Up?", No More Hunger, (Asheville, 1933), pp. 6-7.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁶ "Pelley Head of Silver Shirts", Asheville Citizen, March 23, 1933.

¹⁷ "Friday Night at Galahad ..." Liberation III:9 (March 25, 1933), p. 12.

¹⁸ Pelley, No More Hunger, title page.

¹⁹ McCormack Committee Hearings, No. 73-D.C.-4, p. 261.

became members by applying directly to headquarters in Asheville, submitting an application blank containing fairly detailed personal information, along with a picture²⁰ and a ten-dollar enrollment fee. After a few months, this was reduced to one dollar.²¹ A bulletin entitled "Official Dispatch Number 1" was sent out, further detailing the projected organization. At National Headquarters was the General Staff, consisting of the Chief (Pelley), the Chamberlain, Quartermaster, Sheriff, and Censor. At the state level, heading up each State Encampment, was a Commander, an Adjutant, Purser, Bailiff, and Solicitor. The local units were called Posts, and each of these was under the direction of a Chaplain, along with a Scribe, Almoner, Marshall, and Advocate.²² Pelley said later that this fairly elaborate set-up proved unworkable after six months or so and was replaced by a system of "liaison officers" between him and the local units.²³ Post meetings were open to all members, men or women above the age of eighteen,²⁴ and were concerned primarily with the discussion of issues brought out by the various publications of the movement. Weekly mailings of material from Headquarters may have also provided a basis for the meetings, much as in the days of the League for the Liberation.²⁵

20 Dies Committee Hearings, vol. 12, pp. 7224-7225.

21 Ibid., pp. 7212.

22 "Official Dispatch Number 1", Asheville, 1933, quoted by Dies Committee Hearings, vol. 12, pp. 7232-7233.

23 Dies Committee Hearings, vol. 12, p. 7209.

24 "Official Dispatch Number 1", quoted in Ibid., p. 7234.

25 Actual documentation of the conduct of Post meetings does not appear to be available. The general form can be surmised from the accounts of former members, and the general trend of Pelley's activities.

The shirt that gave its name to the organization was part of a uniform that consisted of a silver-gray shirt, blue knickers, long socks, and a blue necktie. Over the left pocket of the shirt was a four-inch high red "L", standing for "love, loyalty, and liberation". On the tie was woven or pinned the member's national number, distinct from that of any other member.²⁶

(Pelley's number was 1.). Sometimes high boots were worn instead of long socks; riding pants and a ranger-type hat also seem to have been part of the uniform.²⁷ For a time, the uniform was advertised for sale for ten dollars in the pages of Liberation,²⁸ although it was acceptable for individual Silver Shirts to fashion their own outfits by sewing or embroidering the red L onto a silver-gray shirt. To facilitate this, a pattern for the L was provided in several issues of Liberation. The red L also formed the main feature of the flag of the Silver Legion, setting the letter on "snow-white banners to bank around Old Glory and pyramid beneath her."²⁹

The significance of the choice of the color silver is not made clear in Silver Shirt writing. It has been said by a former member of the movement that this was to represent the Christ light, a religious and spiritual aura.³⁰ Opponents of the Silver

²⁶ "Official Dispatch Number 1", quoted in Dies Committee Hearings, vol. 12, p. 7209.

²⁷ E.g., pictures of Pelley in Door to Revelation, facing pp. 476, 477.

²⁸ "Boots and Saddles", Liberation V:8 (October 14, 1933), p. 12.

²⁹ "The Silver Shirts are Gathering", Liberation III:4 (February 18, 1933), p. 2.

³⁰ Interview, 1964, with former member of the Christian Party, a later form of the Silver Shirts. See Introduction. This person, who wishes to remain anonymous, will be referred to as "former member, Christian Party" throughout this study.

Shirts sometimes charged that the name was chosen for the initials, the same as those of Hitler's S. S.³¹ In any case, the name in one form or another (Silver Shirts, Silver Legion, Silver Shirt Legion, Silvershirts) remained a part of the movement for several years.

The purposes of the Silver Shirts as a body were set forth again in Official Dispatch Number 1, though in rather general and vague terms.

This great Christian Militia, nation-wide in its ramifications, means to suddenly become an active, dynamic, vigilante organization that shall not only take definite measures against the present lawless and predatory elements rampant throughout our debauched and distressed country today, but put in political office men from its own ranks, pledged to its own principles, who shall carry out a startling innovation in the furtherance of our American Democracy.³²

This went on to give a brief exposition of the Christian Democracy plan detailed in No More Hunger. The exact definition of "Christian Militia" and "active, dynamic, vigilante organization" was not presented and seemed to be in doubt for some time to come.

Liberation continued to be published as a weekly twelve-page magazine, sold only by subscription for five dollars a year. In the March 25, 1933, issue appeared a modified version of Edward Bellamy's "Parable of the Water Tank", written in 1887, condemning the capitalist system by comparing it to the pouring of one bucket of water into a tank in return for half a bucket in pay. The article concluded with these additions to Bellamy's words: "If a system is wrong, all the legislation in Cosmos

³¹ For example, "Pelley's Progress", News Letter of the News Research Service, Los Angeles, California, February 15, 1940.

³² "Official Dispatch Number 1", op. cit., p. 7233.

cannot make it right . . . Christians can afford to wait! All the Democrats in the universe, and all the Jewish moneylenders on fifteen planets, cannot hoodwink Great Pyramid Prophecy!"³³ The day of reckoning was inevitable, it was destiny. Later issues continued on this theme and argued against Communism, Jews, and the Depression, all of which seemed interconnected. The importance of psychic phenomena and the value of the Christ Democracy were emphasized.

Two speeches made by Congreeman Louis T. McFadden of Pennsylvania in the House of Representatives, attacking the Federal Reserve Board as the real cause of the Depression, were printed in pamphlet form by the Pelley presses. Silver Shirt editorial comments on the pamphlets indicated that this was not the complete story, that dark forces behind the Federal Reserve Board made it the threat that it was.³⁴ Dissemination of such material, along with the magazine and the correspondence course on the Unwritten History of the World, apparently formed the main activity of the Asheville headquarters during the first months of existence of the Silver Shirts.

The policy and tone of Liberation became more explicitly anti-Semitic as the year progressed, directing much of its fire at Bernard Baruch "and his compatriots . . . who help Mr. Baruch conduct his American nation to their racial aggrandizement and

³³ "Remember Edward Ballamy's Parable of the Water Tank?" Liberation III:9 (March 25, 1933), pp. 5-7.

³⁴ Louis T. McFadden, "The Federal Loot Continues", Liberation IV:6 (May 27, 1933), pp. 2-4; also pamphlet, "The Greatest Crime in History"; "I Hereby Impeach the Federal Reserve Board", (Pamphlet--Asheville, 1933), back cover.

profit."³⁵ The Protocols of the Elders of Zion were mentioned, after Representative McFadden had remarked on them in the Congressional Record.³⁶ The vulgarity of modern culture was attributed to the Jews, who were accused of degrading taste and morality through their alleged control of the press and motion pictures.³⁷ Hitler was credited with doing good work; his poor image in the United States was due to his being maligned by the Jewish-controlled press.³⁸ The New Deal was "camouflaged Sovietism".³⁹ Through all these pronouncements ran a spiritual theme, the idea of higher mentors directing the forces of light in the struggle, insuring their ultimate triumph. "We face the eventuality of . . . a Great American Protectorate of Christ Men that shall presently march openly in this nation and undertake the great purge of our debauched institutions . . ."⁴⁰ "MAKE THE RASCALS GIVE IT BACK!" demanded the Silver Shirts.⁴¹ Liberation decried the evils which had befallen the United States, what it referred to as "the campaign of ravishment that makes the Christ Democracy necessary." The magazine showed the sickness; the book No More Hunger described the cure.⁴² The ultimate triumph seemed imminent: "In the cool stretches of the dawn of the Great Day of Armageddon, the enlightened citizenry is assembling."⁴³

³⁵ "Browbeaten Congress Leaves Baruch to Run his Nation", Liberation IV:11 (July 1, 1933), p. 3.

³⁶ "Straws that Indicate the Approaching Gale, Ibid., p. 7.

³⁷ "Has Your Child Learned to Applaud Murder Yet?", Liberation IV:13, pp. 5-6.

³⁸ "Concentrated Information for Silver Shirts . . .", Liberation IV:15 (July 29, 1933), p. 4.

³⁹ "Silver Shirts are Marching!..." Liberation V:1 (August 26, 1933), p. 12.

⁴⁰ "The Fight Gets Hotter" Liberation V:2 (September 2, 1933), p. 12.

⁴¹ "Liberation is a Sword!" Liberation V:4 (September 16, 1933), p. 12.

⁴² ibid.

⁴³ "Where East Meets West!..." Liberation V:10 (October 28, 1933), p. 12.

In the fall of 1933, the Silver Legion branched out by setting up Western Headquarters in Oklahoma City. Also announced at this time was the projected formation of a group called the Silver Rangers, forming a "cavalry -- for aggressive action against the Communist menace in the field."⁴⁴ The by-laws of the Silver Shirt Legion of America, drawn up with the articles of incorporation in March, 1934, described the Silver Rangers as "actionist men, separate from the Posts and their officers although individuals may belong to both, and receiving quasi-military instructions solely from either the Divisional Commanding Officer or the National Commander."⁴⁵ However, its members do not seem to have been men on horseback in a literal sense; Pelley later stated this group was formed on a "publicity basis".⁴⁶ The unit was headed by Luther Powell, reported to be a former organizer for the Ku Klux Klan from Shreveport, Louisiana.⁴⁷ The main activity in Oklahoma City seems to have been the publishing of a weekly newspaper, The Silver Legion Ranger, or Silver Ranger, which carried material similar to that in Liberation as well as news of local Silver Shirt activity.⁴⁸ A former desk-man from the Kansas City Star, James H. Craig, was named editor.⁴⁹ After printing seven issues in Oklahoma City, the publication was moved to Los Angeles, which became the western headquarters for the Silver Shirts in January,

⁴⁴ "Boots and Saddles" Liberation V:8 (October 14, 1933), p.12.

⁴⁵ The Silver Shirt Legion of America, Inc., "By-Laws", quoted in State of North Carolina v. William Dudley Pelley, Superior Court, January term (1942), vol. 2, p. 198.

⁴⁶ Dies Committee Hearings, vol. 12, p. 7263.

⁴⁷ Donald S. Strong, Organized Anti-Semitism in America (Washington, 1941), p. 48.

⁴⁸ "Corn Pone and 'Possum for Hill-Billy Hitlerites" Liberation V:9 (October 21, 1933), p. 8. The title of this article is a reference to a name given the Silver Shirts by the press.

⁴⁹ Pelley, Door, p. 418.

1934. The Silver Legion Ranger explained the choice of location: "No state in the Union is more zealous in Silver Shirt mobilization in these troubled months than California, the home of the Jewish motion picture business and the scene of such Communist activity as the strike which lately affected the San Joaquin Valley."⁵⁰ California would also be the location of many of the problems that were soon to befall the organization.

Pelley delegated a man named Alvin Bick, active in the movement in Idaho, to represent him in California. The situation there was somewhat unstable, and Bick took advantage of the clamor for leadership by breaking with Pelley and forming his own organization, the Associated Americans.⁵¹ Nothing came of this -- only seventeen Silver Shirts were reported to have joined it⁵² -- but it was indicative of a trend which was to develop more fully later, as others broke away to form their own organizations. At this time the Silver Legion Ranger commented on the situation, saying that Pelley was constantly

besieged with Little Souls who proffer their services, are taken on for a time in order to analyze their mettle, and then asked to resign because somewhere in their contact with the Rangers or their executives they gather the idea that they are perfectly competent to fill the Chief's shoes, and all they must do to achieve it is to provide themselves with printed matter, postage stamps and ample lists of names.⁵³

There was more than that to the leadership of an organization such as the Silver Legion, as even its enemies conceded, giving Pelley

⁵⁰ Silver Legion Ranger, I:8 (January 17, 1934), p. 1.

⁵¹ Pelley, Door, p. 424.

⁵² "Snake Bites and Flea Bites for Silver Rangers", Silver Legion Ranger I:10 (January 31, 1934), p. 5.

⁵³ Ibid.

his due.⁵⁴ The Chief, as he was regularly called in the organization's literature, was an important figure holding the movement together.

To smooth out dissension among the California Silver Shirts, Pelley went to Los Angeles in January, 1934. A conflict had developed between the more spiritually oriented members of the movement at the Hollywood Post, interested primarily in the metaphysical precepts of Liberation, and the more activist members, mostly of the Metropolitan Post, who, in Pelley's words, "saw the Jewish question as something to be solved by squadding up, attacking Jewish tailor shops by night, smashing the glass, and leaving threatening missives in Hebrews' letter boxes."⁵⁵ This group was attracting many adherents and much publicity; as many as six hundred people were reported to have attended some of its meetings.⁵⁶ Pelley attempted to reconcile these elements, to organize and control the overly-enthusiastic activists within a manageable working group, to "combine fire and ice".⁵⁷ This campaign seemed successful, and Pelley returned to Asheville a few weeks later.⁵⁸

Soon after his return, an open break occurred in California. Under the leadership of Eugene R. Case, Chaplain of the Metropolitan Post of Los Angeles, a group of dissident Silver Shirts incorporated as the Silver Legion of America, Inc., chartered at the state capital. This group then reportedly

⁵⁴ E. g., Milton St. Mayer, "A Farewell to the Silver Shirts", Real America III:6 (August, 1934), p. 61.

⁵⁵ Pelley, Door, p. 430.

⁵⁶ Donald S. Strong, Organized Anti-Semitism in America, 1930-1940. (Washington, 1941), p. 51.

⁵⁷ Pelley, Door, pp. 427, 430.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 432.

demanded that all Posts in California submit to its jurisdiction, "which would later entail turning over all Post funds to them or . . . [being] . . . disbanded by legal strictures."⁵⁹ The original Silver Legion, headed by Pelley, was not incorporated at this time. To counteract the California move, Pelley had the Silver Shirt Legion of America, Inc., chartered in February, 1934, under the laws of Delaware as a "fraternal, nonprofitable, noncapital organization." Under the terms of this charter, Pelley and two associates were to have complete control of the affairs of the corporation.⁶⁰ Jurisdiction over the California Posts was apparently soon re-established.⁶¹

The reason for the break was uncertain, and there were several different accounts of the underlying factors. The Silver Legion Ranger, still loyal to Pelley, first viewed it as an attempt to put the activist, window-breaking approach into practice; the members of the Metropolitan Post were described as "spirited youngsters who wanted immediate action in fighting the subversive enemy and who began to chafe under the restricting hand and policy of moderation and sober procedure demanded by the Chief of all his associates throughout the nation."⁶² Pelley took the same view in his 1939 autobiography.⁶³ There seemed to be some doubt about Case's motives as leader of the splinter group; some Silver Shirts considered him as a possible Communist agent, disrupting the movement.⁶⁴ Later the Pelley forces tended

⁵⁹ "Chief Pelley Repudiates Maverick Silver Shirts", Silver Legion Ranger, March 28, 1934, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Dies Committee Hearings, vol. 12, p. 7208.

⁶¹ Silver Legion Ranger, April 18, 1934, p. 1.

⁶² ibid., p. 2.

⁶³ Pelley, Door, p. 440.

⁶⁴ "Maverick Silver Shirts", S L R, April 18, 1934, p. 3.

to accept the explanation of Case's action presented in the April 10 issue of the New Masses: there John Spivak saw the move as an attempt to gather in money from a lucrative racket. In this article, Case was quoted as saying when interviewed by Spivak, "Pelley's gotten enough dough out of this racket. Now it's my turn."⁶⁵ The veracity of the article is somewhat in question, since Spivak had the reputation of being something of a "spoofer".⁶⁶ In any case, this is probably the only instance in which a Silver Shirt publication agreed with the New Masses.

The reasons behind the break were presented somewhat differently by Case and his supporters. In their newspaper, the Silver Ranger, IX Division,⁶⁷ they claimed to have broken away from the parent organization because they had suspected German influence in its workings. Was "Pelley Affiliated with the Nazi?" they asked in a banner headline. They went on to imply that he was and to state that "This corporation (Case's) is determined to clean up the Silver Legion of America in California . . . it is determined that Pelley and his German friends shall not continue in control of 'A Great American Organization'"⁶⁸ This accusation of German control was based almost entirely on an article in the March 31, 1934, issue of the magazine Today. The article had referred to certain men as German agents in the

⁶⁵ John L. Spivak, "Silver Shirts Among the Gold", New Masses XI:2 (April 10, 1934), p. 10.

⁶⁶ Personal interview with Joseph Roos, Executive Director of the Community Relations Committee in Los Angeles, August 1964.

⁶⁷ The "IX Division" refers to the six far western states, designated as one of nine regional divisions of Silver Legion activity in the December 30, 1933, issue of Liberation.

⁶⁸ "Pelley Allied with the Nazi?", Silver Ranger, IX Division, 1:5 (April 6, 1934), p. 1.

United States; two men so identified were apparently associated with the California operations of the Silver Shirts.⁶⁹ Whatever its validity, this was the stated reason of the Case forces for the split.

In addition to these internal troubles, the Silver Shirts faced problems from outside forces. During the spring and summer of 1934 a Special House Committee on UnAmerican Activities, the McCormack Committee, was probing into the activities of several organizations, including the Silver Shirts. It was in public hearings conducted by this committee in Los Angeles that a sensational charge was made against one unit of Silver Shirts: attempting to take control of San Diego by force.

According to the account of Virgil Hays and Earl Gray,⁷⁰ Marines who claimed to have been members of the Silver Shirt Legion for several months and to have served as "instructors", the San Diego Post of the Silver Shirts had been drilling with government arms in preparation for a threatened Communist riot on May Day, 1934. The arms had been purchased from men at a local Naval Air Station, along with some twelve thousand rounds of ammunition. Hays and Gray, all the while acting as agents for Naval Intelligence, gave instruction in military tactics and helped with target practice. The plan was to seize the San Diego City Hall and hold off the Communist revolutionaries who were expected to strike on May Day. The seventy-five to one hundred men who were to accomplish this were called Storm Troopers and

⁶⁹ "Pelley Allied", Silver Ranger IX Division, April 6, 1934, p. 1.

⁷⁰ This account is from the record of the McCormack Hearings, No. 73-Calif.-2, pp. 1-25.

were organized into Squads. Directing the operation was Willard W. Kemp, West Coast leader of the Silver Shirts. The plan was abandoned when the Communist demonstration failed to materialize.

This testimony was presented on August 7, 1934, and created a moderate sensation, especially in Southern California. The following day the Los Angeles Herald and Express printed an interview with Craig, of the Silver Legion Ranger, and Frederick Beutel, at whose home meetings of the Hollywood Post had been held. In this article, Beutel stated that "when the San Diego unit began to take action that had a military -er, flavor, it was dropped from the main organization, and its charter was declared forfeit."⁷¹ Pelley later stated that this was untrue. "Kemp called his followers forth on Sunday afternoon and drilled them in maneuvers for dealing with the Reds", which was perfectly all right and patriotic. The charge of taking government arms was denied.⁷² Pelley certainly did not repudiate Kemp, who was to become his running mate on the 1936 Christian Party ticket.⁷³ Except for this one flare-up, there seems to have been little concern, in committee hearings or elsewhere, with the existence of an armed group among the Silver Shirts. Beutel had testified a few days before (on August 3) that he had heard about "Mr. Kemp's organization down there being organized as a rifle club",⁷⁴ but nothing much was made of this before or after the Hays and

⁷¹ W. W. Ferguson, "Leaders of L. A. Silver Shirts Bare Aims", Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express, August 8, 1934, p. A-12.

⁷² "Kemp of San Diego Pelley's Running Mate", Pelley's Weekly, I:10 (January 22, 1936), p. 2.

⁷³ State of Washington, Abstract of Votes Polled at General Election, 1936, p. 42.

⁷⁴ McCormack Hearings, No. 73-D.C.-6 (Extracts from Executive Hearings at Los Angeles, August 3, 1934), p. 565.

Gray testimony. The only further commentary by the Silver Shirts consisted of occasional references to the right to bear arms in defense of America.⁷⁵ Considering the overly activist Silver Shirt element that existed in Southern California, one may readily believe that the alleged incident was in large part true; but it does not seem to have been called for by the general Silver Legion policy as set down by Pelley.

By the time the Hays and Gray testimony was given before the McCormack Committee, serious problems had beset Headquarters in Asheville. Galahad Press, which had been incorporated by Pelley in New York in 1930, was in the process of liquidation because of the departure of the two women employees each holding one-third of the common stock in the corporation. Its assets and liabilities were being assumed by the Foundation for Christian Economics.⁷⁶ Large quantities of printed matter stored in Pelley's home and material held and not yet paid for by local Silver Shirt units constituted a large proportion of the assets of Galahad Press. In April, 1934, a Washington, D. C., stationery firm demanded payment of a \$110 bill. When this demand was not honored, apparently because of the confused state of affairs during a temporary absence of Pelley's, Galahad Press was ordered placed in receivership.⁷⁷ It was claimed that large amounts of money were owed to the Biltmore Press, printers of Liberation, and to the Foundation for Christian Economics.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ E.g., "Kemp Running Mate", Pelley's Weekly, January 22, 1936, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁶ Pelley's account, Dies Committee Hearings, pp. 7205-7206, 7327.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 7321.

⁷⁸ "Bankruptcy Suit Filed Against Pelley's Journal", Asheville Citizen, April 19, 1934.

Assets were found to be less than liabilities, and Galahad Press was declared bankrupt. Pelley said that a great quantity of writings which were assessed as ten dollars worth of scrap paper were later sold by him for seven thousand dollars.⁷⁹ In any case, Galahad Press was wiped out. The publishing of Liberation was suspended after the issue of April 14.

A month later, Pelley and Robert Summerville, then managing editor of Liberation, were indicted for having two years earlier offered Galahad Press stock for sale in a magazine (Liberation) printed in North Carolina without having registered the corporation in the state. This was a violation of the state's "Blue-Sky" laws.⁸⁰ At the time of the advertisement, Pelley's offices were still in Washington, but the physical printing was being done in Asheville.⁸¹ It was also charged that the now bankrupt corporation was misrepresented as prosperous in the advertisement.⁸² After several delays, trial on these charges was set for January, 1935.⁸³

These actions significantly lessened the effectiveness of the Silver Shirt Legion. There was no publication, except the California Silver Legion Ranger, maintained largely through the efforts of Pelley's daughter.⁸⁴ It expired soon after she returned to Asheville.⁸⁵ Craig and Beutel, major figures in Legion work in California, withdrew their support and issued

⁷⁹ Dies Committee Hearings, pp. 7207, 7325.

⁸⁰ State of North Carolina vs. William Dudley Pelley, Superior Court, Buncombe County, May Term, 1934.

⁸¹ Pelley, Door, pp. 447-448.

⁸² North Carolina vs. Pelley, May Term, 1934.

⁸³ New York Times, November 22, 1934, p. 18.

⁸⁴ Pelley, Door, p. 455.

⁸⁵ Last issue in August, 1934.

publications of their own attacking Pelley.⁸⁶ Newspapers and magazines throughout the country carried articles depicting Pelley and the Silver Shirts as finished.⁸⁷ Not put down so easily, Pelley, on August 29, 1934, began publication of a newspaper-magazine called Pelley's, the Silvershirt Weekly. This was a twelve-page weekly periodical with much the same format and contents as Liberation. It carried articles dealing with Silver-shirt prospects (this marked the beginning of spelling Silvershirt as one word), as well as the general condemnation of Communists and Jews. Spiritual and quasi-religious articles were often featured in the pages of the periodical. (Sample titles: "All that Your Life Comprises You Ordered Before Birth" and "Could You Endure It to be fully Clairvoyant?"⁸⁸) The Silvershirt program was presented as a two year plan of education in preparation for the fateful Pyramid date of September 16, 1936, marking the beginning of the triumph of the forces of light.⁸⁹ The merits of Christian Democracy, now often referred to as the Christ Commonwealth, were stressed in many issues.⁹⁰ This was essentially the same program as the one presented in No More Hunger. The October 3 issue declared that the Silvershirts favored a percentage restriction of participation of Jews in national affairs and business. "In other words, we are going to give the Jew only such voice in politics and the professions as his number represent

⁸⁶ "The Trial and the Future" (mimeographed five-page bulletin, Asheville, 1935) -- available on microfilm, New York Public Library.

⁸⁷ E.g., Newsweek, June 2, 1934; Time, May 7, 1934; Real America, August 1934.

⁸⁸ Pelley's, the Silvershirt Weekly 1:4,5 (September 19, 26, 1934), pp. 4-5, 1-3.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1:3 (September 12, 1934), passim.

⁹⁰ E.g., "The New Emancipation Proclamation", Ibid., 1:2 (September 5, 1934), pp. 6-7.

in the Body Politic."⁹¹

A new organizational structure for the Silvershirts was proposed, to be called the Silver Battalion, with Chapters forming the basic units on a local level. These groups were sent the Silver Scripts, "Economics Made Simple", for study and discussion.⁹² These scripts, of which there were twenty in all, covered topics similar to those treated earlier in the Pink and Blue Scripts but with somewhat more emphasis on the economic aspects, that is, on the program for the coming Christian Commonwealth. There was still a heavy stress on the idea of the "unwritten history of the world"; titles ranged from "How Mortal Kings Made the Modern State" to "What is the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number?"⁹³

With Pelley laying out funds for his defense in the impending trial, he had to discontinue Pelley's, the Silvershirt Weekly after eight issues.⁹⁴ He switched to a mimeographed bulletin "to hold my folk in line."⁹⁵ This was called Pelley's Weekly Confidential Information, and had about four issues before being suspended in December. The contents of this consisted mostly of Pelley's informal comments on the world situation and the impending trial. He wrote that it seemed that anyone who criticized the current American scene was labeled Fascist.⁹⁶

⁹¹ "What the Silvershirts Propose to do about the Jew", Ibid., I:6 (October 3, 1934), pp. 6-7.

⁹² "We Have Two Years in which to Rebuild America's Honor", Ibid., I:2 (September 5, 1934), pp. 8-9.

⁹³ "Stupendous Knowledge!", Pelley's Weekly I:16 (March 4, 1936), p. 8.

⁹⁴ Last issue October 17, 1934.

⁹⁵ Pelley, Door, p. 458.

⁹⁶ Pelley, "The Jew Deal Cements Its Gains", Pelley's Weekly Confidential Information, undated, p. 14 (available on microfilm, New York Public Library).

The trial of Pelley and his associates on the sixteen counts took place in January. After two weeks, he and Summerville were found guilty of having advertised stock for sale in North Carolina without registering the corporation with the state, and of having misrepresented the financial condition of Galahad Press as one of "growth and prosperity".⁹⁷ Pelley maintained that this second count was completely untrue, that Galahad Press had at that time been in a reasonable condition of prosperity, and that poor bookkeeping and deliberate misinterpretation by the prosecution was responsible for the contrary appearance.⁹⁸ He had been found guilty, however, and faced sentencing in February. He received a sentence of one to two years hard labor, suspended for five years on the condition that he pay a fine of one thousand dollars plus court costs, "be and remain continuously of good behavior", and refrain from advertising stock for sale unless registered with the state.⁹⁹ Pelley issued a mimeographed bulletin giving his account of the trial and appealing to his supporters for funds to pay his fine;¹⁰⁰ he later said he received enough to cover it within a week.¹⁰¹

The year 1935 was largely one of inactivity for the organization, although some of the Posts apparently continued meeting regularly.¹⁰² Pelley describes spending the next few

⁹⁷ Liberation, April, 1932, quoted in North Carolina vs. Pelley, May Term, 1934.

⁹⁸ Pelley, Door, p. 464.

⁹⁹ North Carolina vs. Pelley, Superior Court, February Term, 1935.

¹⁰⁰ Pelley, "The Trial and the Future" (mimeographed bulletin).

¹⁰¹ Pelley, Door, p. 469.

¹⁰² Letter, Melford Pearson to author, February 24, 1965. Pearson is Pelley's son-in-law, and a former member of the Silver Legion.

months traveling and speaking to groups of Silvershirts in various places throughout the country. In October he went to Seattle and met Roy Zachary, who had helped to organize the movement in the State of Washington. They arranged a meeting in Seattle, at which Pelley spoke and was enthusiastically received by those in attendance.¹⁰³ Some time after this, Pelley began plans for the formation of a Christian Party which was to run candidates for political office in the 1936 election. "Such a party would refute the defamations made by our opponents that we were a seditious, un-American lot, organized to seize the government by violence."¹⁰⁴

Pelley announced his candidacy for President on the Christian Party ticket in a mimeographed bulletin issued in September, 1935. The party slogan was given as "For Christ and Constitution". The basic precepts of the party were much the same as he had been advocating all along, "without retreating a single inch from my four-year position as the unalterable foe of Communistic Jewry, . . . offering the bilked and hysterical American people a roster of all-Christian executives, . . . on whom they can pin their faith for a great American comeback, economically and culturally."¹⁰⁵

On January 15, 1936, the publishing of Pelley's Weekly (the name a shortened form of Pelley's, the Silvershirt Weekly) was begun again. It was an eight-page periodical, its format more that of a newspaper than the earlier Pelley publications. The

¹⁰³ Pelley, Door, pp. 471-473.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 473.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Asheville Citizen, September 11, 1935.

editor was Robert Summerville, and Pelley's new (second) wife Helen was publisher.¹⁰⁶ The paper presented news of Silvershirt activity and prospects for the coming year, along with articles condemning Jews, Communists, and the Roosevelt administration, and promoting the Christian Commonwealth. The basic units of the Christian Party were the nine-member Councils of Safety, meeting in private homes to discuss the issues being raised by the Party. After four such meetings, each member was to find eight new members and form another Council of Safety.¹⁰⁷ This process was to continue until the ideas had been spread throughout the land.

The campaign of the Christian Party consisted mostly of rallies held on the West Coast, where Pelley spent much of his time in 1936. Pelley's Weekly presented the various aspects of the Christian Commonwealth, featuring a different section of the program in each issue.¹⁰⁸ The important Pyramid date of September 16, due to arrive that year, also received emphasis.¹⁰⁹ A sense of an important imminent climax was always present: "Intensified Red Activity Throughout Nation Fulfills Scriptural and Pyramid Prophecy that 1936 is Year for Cosmic Show-Down".¹¹⁰ A plan advocating segregation of Jews into one city in each state, the city to be called a "Beth-Aven", was presented in the May 6 issue.¹¹¹ Many of the issues contained glowing descriptions

¹⁰⁶ Pelley's Weekly, all issues, p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ "Get Into Your Council of Safety, Quick" P W I:19 (January 15, 1934), p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ "We Could Abolish Taxation", April 22, 1936; "How I Would Treat the Aged" (July 15, 1936).

¹⁰⁹ E.g., in "Grave Events to Follow September 16", P W I:19 (March 25, 1936), p. 1.

¹¹⁰ "Reds Impel to Commonwealth", P W I:19 (April 8, 1936), p. 1.

¹¹¹ "How I Would Treat the Jews" P W I:25 (May 6, 1936), p. 1.

of life under the Christian Commonwealth, without the pressures of hunger or the corrupting influences rampant in present society.

As the campaign progressed, it seemed to be concentrating largely on the State of Washington, where many of the most active supporters of the Christian Party (still referred to as Silver-shirts) were found.¹¹² Rallies were held and local councils were active. Pelley returned to the Northwest on June 9. Later in the month he spoke at several meetings, one of which had an audience estimated at over one thousand in Seattle. Meetings were scheduled for other cities and towns in the state also. The slogan of local Silver-shirts was given as "From Washington to Washington".¹¹³ In July Pelley traveled to California, where he and Kemp gave speeches in San Diego, Atascadero, Los Angeles, and other cities.¹¹⁴ After this, a Cavalcade was organized, a car caravan consisting of from thirty to fifty Silver-shirt men, driving from San Diego up along the coast into Washington, through the state to Seattle, and over to Spokane.¹¹⁵ Along the way, Pelley made seventeen open-air speeches in thirty-four days.¹¹⁶ Local supporters often supplied members of the Cavalcade with food and shelter.¹¹⁷ The Cavalcade aimed at publicizing the ideas being advocated by the Christian Party.¹¹⁸ In one notable respect this was unsuccessful: neither

¹¹² E.g., "Tacoma Scene of Frantic Efforts to Crush Christian Party Growth", P W I:28 (April 29, 1936), p. 7.

¹¹³ "Flash! Seattle Silver-shirts One Thousand Strong Hear Chief" P W II:8 (July 8, 1936), p. 1.

¹¹⁴ "California Applauds Chief" P W II:11 (July 29, 1936), p. 1.

¹¹⁵ Pelley, Door, p. 474; "Silver-shirts Move in West" P W II:12 (August 5, 1936), p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Pelley, Door, p. 474.

¹¹⁷ 1964 interview with former member of Christian Party.

¹¹⁸ Letter, Melford Pearson to author, February 24, 1965.

of the two major Seattle newspapers wrote anything at all about the activities of the Christian Party in the state. Pelley's Weekly commented on this as a "censorship of silence".¹¹⁹ The same issue gave an account of a giant two-day picnic of eight hundred Silvershirts in Washington, attended by Pelley, Kemp, and State Chairman Zachary.¹²⁰ All of this activity in the state enabled the Christian Party to put a full slate of candidates on the Washington ballot, with members running for every state-wide office and Congressional post. This was done by meeting the state requirements for a minor party, namely holding a nominating convention with at least twenty-five registered voters as delegates on the day of the statewide primary election.¹²¹ The Christian Party was then entitled to a place on the ballot in the November 3 general election, in Washington, the only state in which it was so represented.¹²²

During the final weeks of campaigning in the fall, Pelley's Weekly noted the arrival of the Great Pyramid date of September 16 with the front page banner headline "Enter King's Chamber Today". This had been expected to mark the beginning of a seventeen-year period leading to the final acceptance of the Christian Commonwealth.¹²³ This theme dominated the entire issue. Pelley later wrote that the date truly had been significant, for after it

¹¹⁹ "Northwest Newspapers" Pelley's Weekly II:13, (August 12, 1936), p. 1.

¹²⁰ "Two-Day Picnic in Northwest", Ibid.

¹²¹ Letter, A Ludlow Kramer, Secretary of State, State of Washington, to author, February 16, 1965.

¹²² "Christian Party in Washington Ran Gauntlet of Jew Derision" Pelley's Weekly III:1 (November 18, 1936).

¹²³ Pelley's Weekly II:18 (September 16, 1936), p. 1.

"Things began to disintegrate mysteriously for the Jews. Franco started winning his way in Spain. John Lewis and his Sit-Downers lost their auto and steel strikes. Roosevelt began to be discredited. And in the exact ratio that the New Dealers started down the toboggan, the Silvershirts forged ahead."¹²⁴ This forward progress did not begin with the 1936 election, however; out of some 680,000 votes distributed among eight presidential candidates in the State of Washington, Pelley received only 1,598. This was better than the tally of the Prohibition (1,041) or Socialist Labor (362) candidates, and close to that of the Communists (1,907), but it was not up to the level of winner Franklin D. Roosevelt (459,579).¹²⁵ The Christian Party ticket was led by E. E. Peterson, candidate for State Insurance Commissioner, who received 2,156 votes out of the roughly 605,000 cast. The other state-wide candidates had comparable totals, generally around 1,900 or 2,000.¹²⁶ It was claimed by Pelley and his supporters that these votes were only those cast on paper ballots, that the Christian Party levers on voting machines had failed to work.¹²⁷ However, there is no record of any such charges filed with the State.¹²⁸ In any case, this marked the end of political office-seeking by the Silvershirts.

Although their activities during the campaign had been primarily political, the Silvershirts had apparently retained

¹²⁴ Pelley, Door, pp. 474-475.

¹²⁵ State of Washington, Abstract of Votes Polled at General Election, November 3, 1936, p. 44.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 45-49.

¹²⁷ "Party Ran Gauntlet", Pelley's Weekly III:1 (November 18, 1936), p. 3. Also related as personal experience (levers not operating) by former member of Christian Party, in interview, 1964.

¹²⁸ Letter, Kramer to author, February 16, 1965.

certain aspects of their vigilante nature. Seeing a threatened coast-wide dock strike in the summer of 1936 as the possible signal for world-wide Communist revolution, they let it be known that they would actively oppose such a move. When the strike was called off, the Silvershirts claimed that their presence had been responsible for averting it.¹²⁹ This assertion is difficult to affirm or deny, but whatever its validity, it represents a certain concept of the movement that was significant.

The end of the 1936 campaign marked the end of a phase in the nature of the Silvershirts. The economic aspects of the Christian Commonwealth, which had played a large part in the Christian Party platform, were to be less emphasized from now on in Silvershirt publicity. For several years, the Silvershirts had based their appeal on the inequities of the existing system and the possibilities for its reform under an incorporated United States. They had thus been economic radicals of a sort, in addition to being militantly anti-Communist. This anti-Communism had found expression in an activist "Christian militia" and a vigilante outlook. After this initial activist approach subsided somewhat, Pelley found that "youthful, unstable and irresponsible zealots were now missing from my audiences" and that their place was being taken by "a type of staid, mature, but increasingly disgruntled adult."¹³⁰ This new type of member influenced the approach that the organization took in combatting the forces it opposed. Creeping conservatism led to a de-emphasis on the economic aspects,

¹²⁹ "Truce in Shipping Strike Laid to Dismay of Leaders", Pelley's Weekly II:22 (October 14, 1936), p. 1; also from interview with former member of Christian Party, 1964.

¹³⁰ Pelley, Door, p. 471.

though they still were part of the body of belief. The vigilante aspects, at least in a real physical sense, were also played down. These were elements that had strongly marked the Silver Legion since its inception. A new phase was about to begin.

Chapter Three: The Silver Shirts as Extreme Conservatives

The changed nature of the Silvershirt approach did not require any alterations in basic philosophy, only a change in emphasis. Concern with Jews as the money power shifted to a major concern with Jews as Communists. Both aspects of the imagined conspiracy continued to have a part in Silvershirt thinking. Also affected was the concept of the vigilante role the Silvershirts had set for themselves. Partly because of the excessive activism of some early members, especially in California, the physical aspects of this were subordinated to a campaign of enlightenment, to make the American people more conscious of supposed radical influences in society. This new approach resulted in a more intensive attack on what were seen as Communistic elements in the New Deal Administration. An appeal was made to business to support Pelley in his opposition to Roosevelt's "Yiddisher Locust-Swarm", and thus fight the "voracious Red nonsense" of the C.I.O.¹ This was typical of the type of material presented in the last years of the Silvershirts. Despite such appeals for action, in many ways it had become mostly a fraternal organization for people with similar ideas. Because of this, it was probably less genuinely newsworthy than it had been. There were other factors that made it appear more so.

With the 1936 election over, Silvershirt activity was certainly less conspicuous than it had been. After spending Christmas with his supporters at the only actual Silvershirt

¹ "What Big-Business Must Do to Avert Roosevelt's Red Ruin", The Weekly Liberation VIII:19 (March 21, 1938), p. 2.

meeting hall, the Silver Lodge in the State of Washington,² Pelley returned to Asheville in January 1937. There he purchased his own printing equipment.³ The publication of Liberation was begun again as a sixteen-page monthly called The New Liberation, the first issue announcing a new concept of the Silvershirt organization. There was to be a recess in activity as the Chief made plans for a more effective assault on the enemy: "The [Silver] Legion as a boy-scout harangue to apathetic citizens will cease to be of moment!"⁴ Local leaders and loyal members would keep in touch with Headquarters, but the formal organizational structure of the Legion was to be in large part abandoned. The New Liberation was to serve as "A sort of monthly bulletin to reach outstanding patriots throughout the United States."⁵ It carried material of a similar nature to that in the old Liberation: charges of Jewish evils and presentation of Silvershirt programs for a solution.

Part of the reason for the changed nature of the movement was given as "the dearth of capable lieutenants and sub-leaders", whom the American public would follow. Without such leadership on a local level, the organization had been unable to function effectively.⁶ Pelley was working with those who were competent leaders to prepare for the day of reckoning. Asheville was described as becoming only a publishing center and clearing house for mail; "the real work of the Legion is being done by local

2 The New Liberation VII:2 (February, 1937), p. 12.

3 Pelley, Door, p. 475.

4 "The Cart With Silver Wheels Rolls Forward" The New Liberation VII:1 (January 1937), pp. 14.

5 "Not for Publication..." Ibid., p. 16.

6 "Chief Pelley Talks Bluntly on Silvershirt Prospects..." The New Liberation VII:3 (March 1937), pp. 3-4.

potentates who know their lieutenants and their territory . . . and perfect themselves in readiness for the time when the truly stricken American people shall welcome The Man on Horseback."⁷ Noted as capable leaders were Kenneth Alexander and Henry Allen of Los Angeles, and Roy Zachary of Seattle.⁸ Zachary was elevated from his post as Washington State Chairman to the rank of National Field Marshall, closely associated with Pelley at Headquarters.⁹ Zachary's work was to bring the Silvershirt organization much of its publicity in the next few years.

The movement continued its existence on this somewhat informal basis for several months, until the spring of 1938. During this time, Pelley began the publication of Reality, subtitled "A Magazine of Practical Esoterics".¹⁰ This magazine, printed for roughly two years, dealt with the more spiritual aspects of Pelley's philosophy, an element which was less obviously present in the pages of The New Liberation. The Golden Scripts, subtitled "New Sermons on the Mount", a series of weekly scripts written in Biblical style and similar in conception to the Pink Scripts, had been first issued in 1936 and continued to be produced during this time. The earlier Pink Scripts, Blue Lectures, White Scripts, and Silver Scripts were also reprinted, re-issued with the Golden Scripts as part of the Valiant Doctrine, providing "answers to . . . enigmas and quandries that have puzzled humanity for ages".¹¹ The New Liberation, "A Journal

⁷ The New Liberator VII:6 (June 1937), p. 16.

⁸ "Not for Publication", Ibid. VII:1 (January 1937), p. 16.

⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁰ First issue (not available in New York Library) around September, 1937. Later copies available in New York Public Library.

¹¹ "The Valiant Doctrine", leaflet; property of former member of Christian Party.

of Aggressive Patriotism"¹² which became semi-monthly with the July 7, 1937, issue, remained most concerned with the political aspects of the movement. Various issues presented the prospects of future Silvershirt development, attacks on Jews and Communists in the Federal government, and proposals for remedies. On December 7, the magazine became The Weekly Liberation. A more activist tone had begun to re-appear, and attacks on the New Deal administration were frequent and violent. It was asserted that Roosevelt was really a Sephardic Jew, descended from the Rossocampos family of Holland.¹³ These and other pronouncements led up to the reactivation of the Silvershirts.

The March 28, 1938, issue of The Weekly Liberation announced the beginning of a new organizational drive, involving the recruiting of new members and the start of renewed activity. Until then, the magazine stated, there had been "a vigilant marking of time, a disposition not to agitate Silvershirt principles until the acts of the New-Dealers so exasperated the public that the Legion as a Legion should better coach public sentiment."¹⁴ This time seemed to have arrived, and the Silvershirts were to become ready to enlighten the American people. A series of proposals by Pelley appeared in the same issue, in which he suggested life imprisonment for John L. Lewis and others, Beth-Avens for Jews, and

the freedom of the responsible individual, the dignity and responsibility of conscientious officialdom, the aggressive instruction to maturing youth in the strictly

¹² The New Liberation VII:7 (July 7, 1937), p. 12.

¹³ "What Big Business Must Do To Avert Roosevelt's Red Ruin", Ibid. VIII:9 (March 21, 1938), p. 2.

¹⁴ "You Asked for It, LaFollette, Our Answer is Silvershirts!" The Weekly Liberation VIII:20 (March 28, 1938), p. 3. The title refers to the summoning of an Ohio Silvershirt leader to testify before the Civil Liberties Committee of the U. S. Senate. The summons was later withdrawn.

American tradition, the recognition of the home owning family as the basic unit of the State, and a general government of probity whose basic tenet first, last, and all the time shall be resolute non-interference with the activities of the citizens insofar as can be contrived in the interests of the public welfare . . .¹⁵

Nowhere was mentioned the program of incorporating the United States under the Christian Commonwealth, although earlier in the month the magazine had carried a three-page article promoting this idea.¹⁶ The April 7 issue compared the Silvershirt plan for the United States to that of a receiver in a case of bankruptcy, "conducting it intelligently through an inevitable economic crisis, and then handing it back to the rank and file of its voting stockholders with rascally incompetence eliminated . . .¹⁷

To direct the new activity of the Silvershirts, Pelley issued a booklet called "One Million Silvershirts By 1939", giving details of the recruiting program, conduct of Post meetings, and other activities. Enlistment forms and credentials were sent out¹⁸ and sheets outlining the formation of local units. One such sheet, entitled "The 4 Primers: What New Silvershirts Should Know", outlined the structure on a local level as being composed of Posts, Chapels, and Councils of Safety. The Councils were like training units for new members; after spending a certain amount of time in them and reading the Protocols, No More Hunger, The Hidden Empire, and The World Hoax (all Pelley publications), they could

¹⁵ "Chief Pelley's Silver Program: How Far Do You Endorse It?" The Weekly Liberation VIII:20 (March 28, 1938), pp. 4-5.

¹⁶ The Weekly Liberation VII:17 (March 7, 1938), pp. 6-8.

¹⁷ "Some Straight-from-the-Shoulder Facts Explaining the American Silvershirts", The Weekly Liberation VIII:21 (April 7, 1938), pp. 6-7.

¹⁸ "Why the Legion Will Fight..." The Weekly Liberation VIII:21 (April 7, 1938), pp. 6-7.

move into a Post, for men, or a Chapel, for women.¹⁹ Whether this plan worked out in practice is uncertain; only the Posts are mentioned in other literature. As in years past, these units seemed to have been concentrated largely on the West Coast.²⁰

To promote the newly activated Silvershirts, Field Marshall Roy Zachary made a speaking tour across the United States during the next few months.²¹ This resulted in a fair amount of publicity for the organization, some of it of a rather sensational nature. When in Chicago, Zachary warned that a Communist dictator was coming to power in America, and "if no one will volunteer to shoot him, I will!"²² This was widely reported as a threat on the life of Roosevelt. Such an interpretation was denied both by the Silvershirts and Dies Committee investigator John Metcalfe, who had attended the meeting at which Zachary spoke.²³ Later in the year, Zachary made speeches further west, in Minnesota²⁴ and Washington²⁵ among other places, drawing protests and minor disturbances from opponents in some areas.²⁶ A meeting held in late November, again in Chicago, was broken up by a crowd of angry youths who crashed in.²⁷ Zachary was attacked and suffered minor injuries. Liberation (Weekly was dropped from the name after the June 7 issue) struck a righteous and vengeful tone and condemned the incident as "attempted murder".²⁸

19 "The 4 Primers: What New Silvershirts Should Know", North Carolina vs. Pelley, Superior Court, January Term, 1942.

20 Strong, Organized Anti-Semitism, p. 51.

21 Ibid., p. 50.

22 Liberation VIII:26 (May 14, 1938), p. 5.

23 Dies Committee Hearings, pp. 43-47.

24 Minneapolis Times, October 29, 1938.

25 Liberation IX:10 (July 28, 1938), p. 11.

26 Ibid.

27 New York Times, November 29, 1938, p. 10.

28 Liberation IX:26 (November 28, 1938), pp. 1-3.

It was around this time, in the fall of 1938, that the House of Representatives set up another Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, headed by Martin Dies of Texas. Its main concern was with Communism, although it spent a large amount of time on groups such as the German-American Bund and the Silver-shirts.²⁹ This investigation and the reaction of the Silver-shirts to it caused public attention to be focused on the group at a time when it was probably less significant than it had been earlier.

In addition to the public speaking activities of Zachary, the Headquarters at Asheville was involved in another form of promotion: the printing of pamphlets. This had been done on a limited basis during the early phases of the movement, but after Pelley had purchased his own printing establishment, the Skyland Press, production of small Silvershirt tracts became more feasible. During 1938 and 1939, the main years of production, at least twenty pamphlets were published presenting ideas promoted by the Silver-shirts. (Sample titles: "Dupes of Judah", "Martin Dies' Political Posse", "After Dictators, What?")³⁰ Many of these were written by Pelley personally, while some were from other sources. (For example, "The Impeachment of Frances Perkins" was based on the speech by J. Parnell Thomas in the House of Representatives.)³¹ One pamphlet entitled "Cripples' Money" accused Roosevelt of appropriating for his own use the proceeds of the annual ball to benefit the Foundation for Infantile Paralysis.³² This accusation

²⁹ Dies Committee Hearings, passim.

³⁰ Number based on a count of those in the New York Public Library, plus some belonging to a private individual.

³¹ Dies Committee Hearings, p. 7213.

³² "Cripples' Money" (Asheville, 1939). Available at New York Public Library.

was soon to be used against Pelley in a legal case.

Attention directed at Pelley and the Silvershirts by testimony before the Dies Committee and Zachary's speaking tours, as well as the usual emphatic issues of Liberation (estimated circulation: 5000),³³ resulted in an F.B.I. investigation of people on Pelley's mailing list, in May of 1939. The results of this investigation were not released to the public;³⁴ all that is known about it is what was said by those investigated. A printed collection of letters to Asheville Headquarters from individual readers of Pelley material presented their view of the situation, condemning the F.B.I. for this sort of investigation.³⁵ The Dies Committee continued its investigations, alternating between Communists and right-wing groups, making frequent references to Pelley and the Silvershirts.³⁶ Martin Dies in November, 1938, had named Pelley to his "all-star team" of "purveyors of hate".³⁷ The Committee continued on this approach in its hearings, asking almost every witness if he had any connection with the Silvershirts.³⁸ Pelley responded to these attacks on him in a novel way: he filed a three million dollar suit against the members of the Committee, saying that they had "maliciously and without foundation publicly charged him with being a representative of the German Government, a racketeer, a violator of criminal statutes of the United States and a public

³³ Testimony of investigator John C. Metcalfe, Dies Committee Hearings, p. 2359.

³⁴ Letter, J. Edgar Hoover to author, November, 1964.

³⁵ "Our Political Police" (Asheville, 1939). Available NYPL.

³⁶ Dies Committee Hearings, passim.

³⁷ New York Times, November 14, 1938, p. 12.

³⁸ Dies Committee Hearings, passim.

enemy."³⁹ This suit was eventually dropped; other legal actions came to involve Pelley more deeply.

On October 19, 1939, Buncombe County (N.C.) Superior Court Judge Zeb V. Nettles, who had been prosecutor in the Blue-Sky law case, ordered the issue of a warrant for Pelley's arrest, on the charge that he had violated the terms of his 1935 suspended sentence.⁴⁰ This was based on the alleged violation of the "good behavior" stipulation of the suspension. It was charged he had published "false and libelous statements concerning a person, to-wit, Franklin D. Roosevelt", a charge based largely on the pamphlet "Cripples' Money". In addition, Pelley was charged with falsely advertising some of his various publications and with misrepresenting and attempting "to bring into contempt" the Buncombe County Superior Court by his accounts of his 1935 trial. It was further charged that he "did willfully, knowingly, unlawfully and deliberately . . . organize, promote and foster a secret political and military organization . . ."⁴¹ All this was considered far from "good behavior". For the next few months, Pelley could not be found. He was wanted by the Buncombe County Sheriff's Office and was also being sought to testify before the Dies Committee.⁴² Meanwhile, Liberation carried many reprints from earlier issues. Pelley later accounted for his absence during this period as an attempt to wait out the five-year terms of the probation, due to expire on February 18, 1940.⁴³ He

³⁹ Quoted in New York Times, September 10, 1939, p. 50.

⁴⁰ "Nettles Orders Sheriff to Seek Silver Shirter", Asheville Times, October 19, 1939.

⁴¹ North Carolina vs. Pelley, May term, 1942.

⁴² New York Times, December 7, 1939, p. 22.

⁴³ Liberation XII:10 (February 21, 1940), pp. 1-4.

voluntarily appeared to testify before the Dies Committee to testify on February 7, 8, and 10, 1940.⁴⁴ In his testimony he took every possible opportunity to praise the Dies Committee for its work in uncovering Communism; he stated that he founded the Silvershirts "to propagandize exactly the same principles that Mr. Dies and this committee are engaged in prosecuting right now; in other words, antagonism to subversive influences in the United States."⁴⁵ The Committee did not appreciate this praise, any more than it had appreciated an earlier attempt by a leftist organization to show a friendly link between Pelley and Dies by means of some forged letters.⁴⁶ At the end of the third day of testimony, Acting Chairman Joe Starnes dismissed Pelley, declaring

You have by your own mouth established all the most serious charges which the previous testimony has leveled against yourself and the Silver Legion of America. We have concluded our examination of you You are at liberty to go. I declare the committee adjourned.⁴⁷

Upon leaving the stand, Pelley was arrested to be held on the North Carolina charges.⁴⁸ A series of appeals and other maneuvers kept the case from final judgment for some time.

While embroiled in these difficulties, Pelley announced that on January 30, 1940, the Silvershirts had been disbanded as an organization. This was exactly seven years after the formation of the group. The disbanding was taking place for three reasons, Pelley wrote: to leave the field open for the Dies Committee to

44 Dies Committee Hearings, pp. 7202-7333.

45 Ibid., pp. 7207-7208.

46 New York Times, January 23 - February 6, 1940, especially January 31, February 1, p. 10.

47 Dies Committee Hearings, p. 7333.

48 New York Times, February 11, 1940, p. 1.

uncover the subversive elements in society, thereby demonstrating that the Silvershirts are not "racketeering patrioteers"; to clean out the "deadwood that now clutters the organization", removing irresponsible people from membership; and to "evolve a nation-wide patriotic Fellowship . . . that should contain no elements or phases of militarism while at the same time appealing to the rank and file of equitable-minded people as standing for something more than anti-Semitism."⁴⁹ It seemed to him that the third Dies Committee, then in operation, was carrying on the work that the Silvershirts had started, exposing subversives in American life. That phase of the work was therefore finished; if continued, Pelley said, "my activities would be comparable to William Lloyd Garrison's continuing to publish his Liberator and agitate for Abolition after President Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation."⁵⁰ Attacks on the organization had lessened its effectiveness; now "all controversial incriminations may be allowed to cease while awakened authorities . . . do their business."⁵¹ This message from the Chief was marked by a noticeable change in tone from some of the violently bitter material that had appeared in preceding years; this seemed calm and dispassionate, a mood that was to become more prevalent in his future writings.

After the dissolution of the Silver Legion as an organization, there was little activity on the part of its former members. Many continued to meet on a social basis, but there were no formal

⁴⁹ "Drastic Change Ordered", Liberation XII:10 (February 14, 1940), pp. 1-6.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵¹ Liberation XII:10 (February 14, 1940), p. 6.

meetings as such.⁵² Liberation was published in Asheville for the rest of the year.⁵³ On December 20, 1940, it was announced that Pelley's printing equipment had been purchased by Carl Losey of Noblesville, Indiana, who intended to set up a magazine of his own.⁵⁴ Sometime after this, Pelley, now in Indiana, began the printing of a magazine called Roll Call, The Voice of the Loyal Opposition. This magazine was primarily political in outlook, although less adamant in its statements than Liberation had been. Beginning in September 1941, The Galilean, a magazine with a primarily spiritual format, was published with and then superseded Roll Call after December, 1941. Pelley also produced some more pamphlets attacking the Roosevelt administration and the Wilkie control of the Republican Party, among other things.⁵⁵ When this country entered World War II, Pelley criticized the forces that he felt had led us into the conflict.

The North Carolina case was still pending during this period. After all avenues of appeal were exhausted, Pelley surrendered to authorities at Asheville.⁵⁶ He was sentenced to two to three years hard labor in January, 1942, and promptly appealed.⁵⁷ He continued publishing The Galilean, including in the February 16 an article entitled "We Fight Only For This Republic", later printed as a pamphlet. This article protested American involvement in World War II and proposed withdrawal if the situation did not change. It argued that the struggle was none of our affair,

⁵² Letter, Melford Pearson to author, February 24, 1965.

⁵³ Last issue in January, 1941.

⁵⁴ New York Times, December 21, 1940, p. 9.

⁵⁵ New York Times, January 21, 1942, p. 11.

⁵⁶ "William Dudley Pelley, Silver Shirt Leader, Surrenders to Officers", Asheville Times, October 24, 1941.

⁵⁷ New York Times, January 21, 1942, p. 11.

that we had no more right to impress the American Way of Life on foreign peoples than Hitler had to impress the Nazi way of life, and that "this war cannot be decided halfway in our favor till the Jacobins, jackals and Judaists have been junked." America's position was presented as untenable.⁵⁸ On April 4, still awaiting the decision on his North Carolina appeal, Pelley was arrested by agents of the F.B.I. on charges of sedition. The charge was based on statements made in The Galilean from December 22 to March 2, and in the pamphlet, "We Fight For This Republic Only". One of the six thousand copies of the pamphlet had been found in a soldier's duffle bag,⁵⁹ and Pelley was charged under the Espionage Act of 1917 with making false statements, attempting "to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States . . . or . . . to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty in the . . . forces of the United States" ⁶⁰ Pelley pleaded not guilty to the charges, and was brought to trial in Indianapolis in July and August, 1942. In the course of the trial, Pelley's defense summoned among other witnesses Charles A. Lindbergh, who himself had publicly favored American non-involvement in the War. The defense also tried to show that the United States government was actually bankrupt and that the statements for which Pelley was on trial were true and not covered by the law.⁶¹ These and other tactics were unsuccessful. Pelley received a fifteen year

⁵⁸ "We Fight Only for This Republic", The Galilean I:13 (February 16, 1942), pp. 1-15.

⁵⁹ New York Times, July 29, 1942, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Quoted in New York Times, April 5, 1942, p. 1.

⁶¹ Trial given detailed coverage by New York Times, July 29-August 6, 1942.

sentence.⁶²

Throughout the involvement of the United States in the War, Pelley was involved in legal actions. Not content with one sedition conviction, the Justice Department moved against Pelley and several other right-wing writers and leaders, first charging them with "conspiring to impair the morale of the armed forces"⁶³ -- as in the earlier Pelley case -- and later with actually plotting in cooperation with Germany to incite mutiny, unseat the government and establish a Nazi regime.⁶⁴ When the case ended in a mistrial after the death of the presiding judge,⁶⁵ most of the defendants were free to go. Pelley returned to prison. His publicly silent followers gave no signs of conspiring to do anything that would radically alter the situation, despite the fears of the Justice Department.

This marked the end of William Dudley Pelley as a public figure. The members and alumni of the Silver Shirt Legion were no longer newsworthy, and the supporters were lost from view. This marked the end of the final phase in the activities of the movement that had begun as a mystical, quasi-religious venture into psychic research and spiritualism, had developed into an extreme political-economic movement with military overtones, had evolved into a political party of sorts and then what seemed to be a super-patriotic fraternal organization, and had ended with a tendency to return to the spiritual material that had begun it. After the Silver Legion as a body had been dissolved,

62 New York Times, August 13, 1942, p. 6.

63 New York Times, August 20, 1942, p. 21.

64 New York Times, January 4, 1944, p. 1.

65 New York Times, November 23, 1946, p. 9.

the only local meetings of a formal nature were those of the Galilean Fellowship, which had begun Weekly Studies in Soulcraft.⁶⁶ (The political statements in The Galilean were part of the personal expression of Pelley as a man. There was no organization through which this was directed, as there had been.) Through all this ran a certain basic philosophy and a consistent world view. The differences observable in the movement are largely those of emphasis, and of organization, and perhaps of membership. The stress placed on certain elements of what might be called the Silvershirt philosophy at different times may tend to give a distorted picture: certain doctrines underlay all they did. A more unified examination of these doctrines would be useful for a better understanding of the movement.

⁶⁶ These were supplied with scripts called "The Upper Room Discourses". (Not available in NYPL, Personal loan).

Chapter Four: Principles and Programs

The Silver Shirt Legion held a body of belief that has influenced people throughout the years, not only those associated with Pelley and his organization. Many of his ideas can be traced to other figures and movements on the fringes ~~or~~ even in the mainstream of American history. The Silver Shirt ideology is a self-consistent world view, often at odds with the generally accepted concept of the nature of things. Different aspects of the belief received varying amounts of emphasis at different times, but the whole theoretical structure was generally constant. This ideological basis must be considered for an adequate understanding of the Silver Shirts and their program.

It is estimated that only about half of those involved in the Silver Legion were interested to any great extent in the mystical, metaphysical aspects of the movement.¹ Yet the basis of Pelley's outlook had originally been spiritual, and this continued to influence the concept of the movement as a religious crusade of sorts, destined to triumph over the Forces of Darkness. This had been especially evident in the early phases of the Silver Shirts, when such stress was placed on Pyramid prophecy and clairaudient messages. In the late 1930's, there tended to be a greater separation between the temporal and spiritual aspects of the movement, but the underlying basis was still there.

In certain respects, the spiritual ideas of Pelley and his followers were akin to the Eastern religions, with their belief

¹ Estimate of former member of Christian Party, in interview, 1964.

in reincarnation² and the mastery of the spirit over the body. There was a definite concept of playing certain ordained roles in life, of acting out a cosmic destiny. This applied not only to individuals, but to nations and races as well. According to this belief, an individual soul emerges from the "ocean of universal spirit" to "find itself" in its first of many lives on earth, with much to learn. He enters mortality as a member of the black race, and continues in this, all the while learning; being black, he "absorbs everything and gives back -- or reflects -- nothing". He, as a Negro, is the "hewer of wood and the drawer of water." After several incarnations, he, "having familiarized himself with spirit occupancy of the mortal vehicle . . . begins to prepare himself for incarnation in the race that is known as Yellow." As a member of the Yellow Race, he continues to learn, but accrues primarily material values. It is only after several further incarnations that he has learned his lesson well enough to enter life as a member of the White Race, more aware of the spiritual quality of life. After this, he may "graduate off into higher octaves . . . grander concepts of consciousness without any further contact with earth." Races exist, by this standard, "to give identification to gradations of cosmic progressions." Racial purity is necessary to maintain the advanced state of the noble people, the Aryans, who have learned their cosmic lessons and are naturally superior. Any attempt to alter this divinely ordained structure would result in earthly

² Reality often carried a list of "Seventeen Reasons for Accrediting the Fact of Reincarnation".

turmoil.³

Although race was not a central issue in the body of belief of the movement, these ideas give an indication of the general line of thinking which influenced the Silver Shirts. It also ties in with its anti-Semitism: the Jews were considered to be primarily "Mongolic", eager for material gain, but not spiritually ready for the position of power they seemingly sought in the Aryan world. The general ideas also provide a spiritual promise to believers who consider that they may be ready to graduate to higher planes of existence in other worlds. Throughout this spiritual writing is stressed the concept of karma, the working out of cosmic laws ~~as~~ in individual and national existence.⁴ The search for the understanding of these universal precepts governing all existence could be considered the central theme of Pelley's writing. Into this search were incorporated ideas from many sources, forming the specific beliefs of the Silver Shirts.

Important to the ideology was a belief in Pyramid prophecy as the record and foreteller of all events of history. This idea was presented in detail by two Englishmen, D. Davidson and H. Aldersmith, in a 568 page book first published in 1924, The Great Pyramid: Its Divine Message, and was adopted by Pelley for his movement.⁵ Also important was the belief in the

³ "What You Should Know About the Cosmic Role of Race", The Galilean 1:15 (March 2, 1942), pp. 1-5.

⁴ Know Your Karma, a book written by Pelley and published in 1957, is only one example of the importance of this theme in his work.

⁵ First edition published in London, 1924. Eighth edition, 1940. The book refers to the period from September 16, 1936, to August 20, 1953, as the time the "English-speaking peoples should be guided, as the nucleus of the theocratic World State, . . . under the law of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth." (p. viii) Pelley acknowledged Davidson as his primary source on Pyramid prophecy.

possibility of earthly contact with souls in the higher planes of existence. These last two concepts had the most bearing on the movement's practical aspects; other beliefs, such as in the existence of the Lost Continents of Atlantis and Lemuria, reflect the general metaphysical outlook of the movement. Related to all this was a concern with mysterious spiritual and metaphysical happenings in the past, the "unwritten history of the world".

"Were the Oceans Once in the Skies?" asked a Blue Lecture, presenting the case for believing that great quantities of water once circled the planet in Saturn-like rings before falling to earth in the Deluge and forming oceans. Other such theories accounted for the sinking of Atlantis and the rise of Egyptian civilization. Most of these theories were from other sources;⁶ together they formed an agglomeration of colorful and intriguing ideas that went into the world view of many of the Silver Shirts.

While the over-all view of world history was concerned with cataclysmic events and lost civilizations, all part of a unified cosmic plan, modern history could be seen more simply as the result of a sinister plot.⁷ According to this view, the plot had been in operation since before the French Revolution, and its purpose was to gain power and eventual world control for a select group of people. It operated in many devious ways and was responsible for all of society's ills. Its principal means of control was financial power, and it was with this aspect that the Silver Shirts were principally concerned at first.

⁶ Pelley credited Ignatius Donnelly's Atlantis: the Antediluvian World (New York, 1882) as his major source in that area. See "Our Proofs of the Existence of Atlantis", Blue Lecture No. 15 (in New York Public Library).

⁷ This view presented in detail in "The Hidden Empire", a Pelley publication of 1936. (Available on personal loan -- not in New York Public Library).

This idea, the concept of a conspiracy of international financiers taking advantage of the American people for selfish personal gain, had been important in the thinking of certain groups since the late nineteenth century. In many ways, the Silver Shirts can be seen as the inheritors of a tradition most closely associated with the Populists. The tradition was modified as it became overtly anti-Semitic, but the basic concept of a financial conspiracy was the same.

Populist and free-silver writers such as William H. "Coin" Harvey had denounced the "money power" which controlled the economy through its manipulations of gold.⁸ This was an important theme in Populist literature, one which stressed the importance of money in the functioning of the economy. The fluctuations in the economy seemed as if they must be the result of manipulations by those who controlled the money, the Eastern financiers and European international bankers. The identity of the bankers was usually not specified, although the Rothschilds received a certain amount of attention.⁹

The existence of overt Populist anti-Semitism is uncertain. There is apparently great disagreement among current historians on this question. Richard Hofstadter, among others, points to the identification of bankers as "Shylocks", the designation of the Rothschilds as particularly sinister world figures, and pronouncements of a few of the more outspoken Populists¹⁰ as

⁸ W. H. Harvey, Coin's Financial School, new edition (Cambridge, 1963).

⁹ For example, Coin's Financial School, p. 215 shows a map of the world in which an English-based octopus labeled "Rothschild" has extended its tentacles over all the continents.

¹⁰ Statements were made about "Wall Street and the Jews of Europe" and Grover Cleveland as "the agent of Jewish bankers and British gold." See R. Hofstadter, Age of Reform (New York, 1954), pp. 76-81.

indications of anti-Semitic tendencies. Norman Pollack attacks this argument by presenting evidence that only in a few isolated instances was anti-Semitism expressed as part of the Populist movement and that the general reformist tone of the movement was in conflict with this sort of thing.¹¹ Whatever the relative importance of anti-Semitism to the Populists, they provided a theory of history in which money control was of primary importance and the idea of a strong financial conspiracy. The anti-Semitism of the Silver Shirts, at least in its early stages, derived from their specific identification of this conspiracy as Jewish. This was an extension of Populist thought beyond its original limits, but the conception was basically the same.

As they had identified the international bankers as Jews, so too the Silver Shirts identified the basis of another threat to the American way of life, Communism.¹² This was seen as another branch of the international conspiracy to conquer the world, through stimulating internal unrest as well as holding economic control. Communism was considered to be the effective military-political arm of a united conspiracy which had as its aim the subjugation of all mankind to the wishes of a chosen few. Agents of the conspiracy were imagined as existing everywhere, infiltrating even the United States government. The moral tone, the social culture of the country was being debased by the actions of these conspirators in their production of motion pictures,

¹¹ Norman Pollack, "Hofstadter on Populism", Journal of Southern History XXVI:4 (November 1960), pp. 479-500.

¹² These ideas are presented in "The Hidden Empire", as well as in many other Pelley publications.

popular songs, and modern literature, demoralizing America and setting it up for the final take-over by the conspiracy. Even the press, supposedly owned by Jews or heavily dependent on the advertising of Jewish-controlled department stores, helped this trend. All these things the Silver Shirts believed, and this influenced their conception of a solution.

It is in the choice of a solution that the Silver Shirts diverged most sharply from the Populist tradition, although a few similar elements remained. While the Populists had favored government regulation of the financial oppressors, the Silver Shirts advocated turning the entire economy into a colossal corporation. The Christian Democracy, or Christian Commonwealth, plan to incorporate the United States was unique, apparently an original contribution by Pelley.¹³ This plan was expected to break the hold of the conspiracy and provide a better, more comfortable life for all Americans. The breaking of the conspiracy would be effected in two ways. First, the new economic system would no longer allow the accumulation of wealth, the earning of interest, or the control of money by foreign bankers. Second, certain quota restrictions would be placed on Jewish participation in national life. (This aspect of the plan was not included in the 1933 edition of No More Hunger, and did not appear until 1934, in Pelley's, the Silvershirt Weekly.) Privilege would be abolished, but initiative and merit would still be rewarded through the issuance of dividend paying Preferred Stock on the basis of the amount of contribution made to the society,

¹³ Details of the plan presented in No More Hunger.

as well as Realty Stock for property ownership. Everyone would receive Common Stock paying dividends sufficient for subsistence income. All payment would be in the form of checks on the one national bank, to be exchanged for goods at a giant local distribution center. This income could be saved for only short periods of time; at the end of the year, all reserves would be wiped out, thus eliminating the possibility of accumulating great wealth. Checks were not transferrable, and had to be spent within the year at a distribution center. Inheritance was also abolished, with the exception that a widow and her children were entitled to the income level achieved by the late husband and father. These innovations would result in a better life for all, and all the attendant ills of the existing American society would disappear. Poverty, hunger, crime, immorality all would become things of the past. It was a new society in which all men, although inherently not equal, had equality of opportunity.¹⁴ (This might be amended to say "all men except Jews", but the original program contained no such ethnic distinctions, only an opposition to the financial system controlled by international bankers.)

The political structure under this new economic order was to be similar to the traditional American system, with the exception of the popular vote on every major piece of legislation. This was to provide a greater voice in self-government for American citizens and to strike down paternalistic Big Government. That all this, including the incorporated economy, could be activated

¹⁴ This last idea presented by former member of Christian Party, interview, 1964.

by only one Constitutional Amendment is a significant assertion; the Silver Shirts saw themselves as within the American Constitutional pattern. The changes in American society were not considered as real changes, but rather as a purging of old institutions of new and debauching elements. This theme, always present, became increasingly important until, in the late 1930's, it was stressed above that of the changeover to the Christian Commonwealth or incorporated United States. Pelley, in a statement of purpose in the November 7, 1937 issue of Liberation, wrote that he favored a return to the traditional American economic and political structures; only if they proved unworkable would he advocate the plan presented in No More Hunger.¹⁵

The increasing stress on conservatism, indicated in the account of the development of the organization, produced statements such as the denunciation of Sinclair Lewis' Main Street as a "distorted, reprehensible libel on the American small town". (Pelley's The Fog, published in 1921, was supposedly written as an answer to it.)¹⁶ Many of the points of emphasis changed over the years. The one factor that seemed constant was anti-Semitism; yet even here the emphasis is changed, from Jews as bankers and exploiters to Jews as Communists and debauchers. They still believed in a Jewish plot, the kind laid down in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, but the main concern of the Silver Shirts seemed to be shifting to a different conception of the Jews. Again, this is not an absolute change, for there was a concern with both aspects of the conspiracy all along.

¹⁵ Liberation VIII:5 (November 7, 1937), p. 2.

¹⁶ Pelley, Door, p. 176.

The political philosophy of the movement is best expressed in Nations-In-Law, a two-volume "unconventional analysis of civics" written by Pelley and published in 1938.¹⁷ This work is strongly influenced by concepts from his metaphysical ideas, such as "spiritual progression". Yet it is essentially a book of political philosophy. It incorporates the racial idea of national character into its broad framework of civic theory and makes use of the concept of "Group Cognizance" as necessary for the unity of society and the fullest expression of the individual.¹⁸ Cohesiveness and unity of purpose are important, and "freedom is only freedom when it is exercised in consideration of group welfare."¹⁹ Necessary to the proper functioning of society are wise leaders to interpret and direct the group consciousness.²⁰ This approach is contrasted with that of the Political Mind, which produces only leaders seeking personal gain by courting popular favor. In this theoretical presentation there seem to be certain elements similar to Plato's Republic or even to Rousseau's Social Contract, in which philosopher-kings, spiritually advanced, interpret the general will. Indeed, at least a few of the people associated with the Silver Shirt movement seem to have a special affinity for Plato.²¹ The significance of this is uncertain; it might indicate a tendency to believe in a "leadership principle" as such. This could be

¹⁷ William Dudley Pelley, Nations-In-Law (Asheville, 1938), 2 vols.

¹⁸ Pelley, Nations-In-Law, p. 188. This concept of "Group Cognizance" is also sometimes referred to as the "Social Mind".

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 144.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 98, 196-198, and other places throughout the book.

²¹ Personal observation from conversation with former Christian Party member, 1964.

demonstrated by the constant use of the title "The Chief" in reference to Pelley, by the subtitle of Pelley's Weekly, "the Expression of a Leadership", and by the concepts presented in Nations-In-Law. However, there was more to the book than this, and Pelley often stated opposition to totalitarian autocracy.²² The idea of the popular pleb¹/escite advocated in No More Hunger was also in conflict with any strict leadership principle.

Probably there was a feeling that a temporary absolutist government might be necessary, just as force of arms might be, to counteract the entrenched agents of conspiracy when they resisted the Silver Shirt program. This was not specifically stated, but there are implications of it in some of the Liberation articles. It was not a desired end, only a possibly necessary evil and a means to a higher end. The way to implementing the program was to be mainly through the enlightenment of the American people and vigilance against Communist uprising. The Christian Commonwealth was inevitable, anyway.²³

Within this structure of belief, anti-Semitism was a conspicuous feature. There was never any direct advocacy of violence against the Jews, only the prediction that if there were a Communist revolution, the American people would perpetrate great pogroms in retribution. Pelley said that he favored segregating the Jews into Beth-Avens for their own protection in anticipation of such an event.²⁴ This would also have the effect

²² For example, Pelley's Weekly, April 22, 1936, p. 4.

²³ No More Hunger states this inevitability, schedules the Commonwealth to be instituted by March 4, 1945 (a Pyramid date).

²⁴ "How I Would Treat the Jews", Pelley's Weekly, May 6, 1936, p. 1.

of breaking up their alleged economic control of the nation.

Among the general public, the idea of Jewish economic control was probably more widely accepted than the other elements of the alleged conspiracy, and because of this Fortune magazine undertook a study to disprove the notion. The results were printed in the February 1936 issue of the magazine and later appeared in book form.²⁵ With the exception of Kuhn, Loeb, and Company, ranking about eighth in its field, no Jewish-controlled firms were found to have a significantly powerful role in finance. Heavy industry was also found to be controlled by non-Jews. Jewish control was predominant in the clothing, liquor distilling, and tobacco-buying business, but most major retail merchandise outlets (except for New York City department stores) were owned by non-Jews. The communications media were found to be about half Jewish-controlled. Motion pictures definitely were, although less completely than ten or fifteen years earlier. Journalism and advertising were not, and radio and the theatre were each about equally divided. Jewish economic power was not found to be overwhelming by any means. These results were not accepted by the Silver Shirts, who claimed that much Jewish control was operated from behind the scenes, through Gentile fronts.²⁶ The discrediting of the Protocols as forgeries by various sources was similarly treated by those who believed: whether the Protocols are genuine or not, they are working out in practice, so they must be being followed.²⁷

²⁵ Editors of Fortune, Jews in America (New York, 1936).

²⁶ Personal interview with Melford Pearson, 1964.

²⁷ Ibid.

There was more to Silver Shirt belief than simple anti-Semitism, though it was this aspect that caught the public eye. It was also the element most stressed by the propaganda of the movement, for its purpose was to expose the evils of the existing system in preparation for the introduction of the Christian Commonwealth. Many of these ideas derived from an American tradition, perhaps one that had gone somewhat astray from its original source. Whatever the origins of these ideas, whatever their validity, there was a body of people who believed in them, who were interested enough in the Silver Shirt principles and programs to involve themselves in the movement. Pelley was the central figure in this; it would be wise to consider him and his followers more carefully.

Chapter Five: The Chief and his Followers

The Silver Shirt movement encompassed many beliefs that lay outside the main current of American thought. Only a small minority of the American people actively accepted them. The few who did, convinced enough of the rightness of their cause to devote time, effort and money to an unpopular organization, must be considered. Their motives and their backgrounds are of importance in determining the nature of the movement. The key figure in all this is Pelley; as Chief, he set the tone and policies of the movement and was responsible for its activities. His writings reflect much about him and his attitudes.

Through all of this study, there has been the implicit assumption that Pelley was basically a sincere crusader for what he believed to be a righteous cause. But it would be useful to consider other motives that might have underlain his role as leader of the Silver Shirts. He was variously accused of being an agent for Nazi Germany, a power-hungry maniac, and a racketeer cynically taking advantage of the prejudices of credulous Americans. Each of these interpretations fails to account adequately for all that Pelley did. Each, however, should be considered, though little documentation exists for any of them.

The charges that Pelley was a Nazi agent, plotting to set up a dictatorial regime in alliance with Germany, have little to support them. It was shown that he had had some contact with a representative of a German steamship line, but not that he was ever in direct communication with the German government.¹ There

¹ McCormack Committee Hearings, No. 73-D.C-4, p. 257

was little evidence introduced on the subject, even in the two trials at which Pelley faced sedition charges, in 1942 and 1944. It was shown that he had expressed certain beliefs similar to those of the Nazis but not that he was an actual agent for them. (These ideological links will be discussed later.) A reasonable argument against the concept of Pelley as a German agent was presented by Milton Mayer in an article attacking the Silver Shirts in 1934, shortly after the bankruptcy of Galahad Press: "the Nazis would not let their American branch go to the wall for a few unpaid bills."²

If not a Nazi, was Pelley a native-born self-seeking power-grabber? This is difficult to determine, but on the basis of his writing and the nature of his presentation, it seems that he was personally more concerned with the power of Right (as he conceived it) than with the power of Pelley. If he had been more opportunistic or presented a less extreme program, it is possible that he could have garnered a larger following and would have had more chance at personal power. Instead he proclaimed, using the words of William Lloyd Garrison, "I will not equivocate, I will not play politics, I will not retreat a single inch, and I will be heard!"³ He was heard, and rejected by most. Yet it has been shown that there were modifications in his approach and that the organization changed somewhat in character over the years. It is possible that he deliberately tried to attract a different type of member. This policy, if it was one, could offer support

² Milton Mayer, "Old Klans in New Shirts", Real America III:5 (July, 1934), p. 35.

³ Masthead, Liberation, several issues, 1933.

for the racketeering motives suggested by many. However, the basic program of Pelley always remained untouched, and it is more likely that he tried to attract more members through minor modifications only to further this program and not to enrich himself.

The frequent charge that Pelley was a racketeer is a difficult one either to substantiate or refute completely. There seems to be no accurate statement of the finances of the movement, but the circumstances do not indicate that Pelley personally profited to any great extent, or that money-making was his basic motive. He had been a fairly well-known, well-paid commercial writer for several years, with his name listed in Who's Who in America in three editions in the late 1920's⁴ and an estimated annual income of twenty-five thousand dollars.⁵ It may be that, as Walter Winchell claimed, "his stuff went stale",⁶ or that his income level was lower than this estimate. As a writer on metaphysical, political, and racial subjects, however, he was forced to rely mainly on contributions from his members to keep going. The printed matter, the magazines and pamphlets, carried almost no advertising from outside sources, yet sold for from ten to twenty-five cents a copy, hardly guaranteeing a high rate of return. The ten dollar enrollment fee in the Silver Legion was dropped because, said Pelley, it had "the aspect of a membership racket."⁷ Much of his personal income was apparently

⁴ Who's Who in America 1924-25, 1926-27, 1928-29. He continued to be listed up until the 1944-45 edition.

⁵ Pelley, Door, p. 347.

⁶ Quoted in Liberation in 1933.

⁷ Dies Committee Hearings, vol. 12, p. 7212.

used in his travels organizing and publicizing the Silver Shirts, or ploughed back into the work, or used in fighting his numerous legal battles. There was no evidence of conspicuous consumption on his part: his home after the move to Indiana was (and still is) a concrete block structure attached to the back of the box factory that became his printing plant.⁸

It was not all sacrifice, for Pelley apparently was able to make a fair amount of money in the spiritual side of his work. It was in this area that he attracted some wealthy contributors, including George Fisher, a magazine executive who gave some twenty thousand dollars over the years.⁹ He, however, discouraged Pelley from his political writing.¹⁰ If Pelley were interested only in personal financial gain, he would have recognized the unprofitability of his political crusade, as well as its hazards as World War II loomed on the horizon. He could have lived fairly comfortably and safely on the income from his metaphysical writings, though they would not have made him rich. Instead, he continued to publish political and anti-war material. This is a foolish way to run a racket; it would tend to indicate that his campaign was sincere.

Many factors in Pelley's earlier life seem to provide sufficient ground for him to have held his ideas sincerely. His small town New England childhood held many disappointments, and the "orthodox Protestant theology" of his minister father "was far more plentiful . . . than bread, butter, clothes and fuel in

⁸ Personal observation.

⁹ Dies Committee Hearings, vol. 12, p. 7276.

¹⁰ Interview with former member of Christian Party, 1964.

those days."¹¹ When poverty forced his father to leave the ministry, the young Pelley unwillingly left high school to help his father in his new business. The spiritual tenets of the old-line theology had become meaningless for the boy, who grew into manhood and a career as a writer with a feeling of emptiness and lack of a needed faith. He felt a growing sense of futility and meaninglessness in his life, even while he was enjoying moderate success as a motion picture writer. It was this gap that his "seven minutes" experience filled, by showing him a new meaning and purpose in life, on a spiritual level.¹² This was the origin of his new approach to life, which has continued ever since.¹³

The origins of Pelley's specific later ideas and actions can also be seen to a certain extent in his life before 1928. His trip to Japan and Siberia in 1918 gave him some exposure to the threat of Communism, although most of the articles he wrote for Sunset were popular surveys of the peoples of Russia, Japan, and Korea, with only occasional references to "the Bolshevik menace".¹⁴ Moderately progressive ideas were featured in some of his short stories and articles, favoring woman suffrage and labor's right to organize.¹⁵ An early origin can be seen for the writing and printing activities in which he engaged after 1929.

¹¹ Pelley, "Seven Minutes", American Magazine, March, 1929, p. 139.

¹² Pelley, "Seven Minutes", passim. This interpretation of Pelley's spiritual experience as the result of deep psychological need is shared by Donald Strong, Organized Anti-Semitism, pp. 43-44.

¹³ See Epilogue for continuation of this.

¹⁴ Several articles in Sunset, vol. 42, 43, 1919.

¹⁵ "Why I Am Glad I Married a Suffragist", "Wanted: A Younger, More Practical Man", American Magazine, May 1918, April, 1920

He had long been interested in printing and had produced his first magazine in 1907. He also had operated several newspapers. His entry into the magazine field in 1930 with The New Liberator was not unprepared for. Thus, Pelley's early life suggests that he might well have held his beliefs sincerely, and he had long before the Silver Shirt days used the printing press to disseminate them.

Pelley's concept of himself as Chief of the nation-wide movement he had founded involved a strong feeling that he was a man of destiny. He believed himself to be leading the forces of Right to a certain victory and felt that "nothing can harm him until he has done the work he came into life at this particular time to do."¹⁶ He had come to lead the forces that would free the nation from its enslavers. He often compared himself to William Lloyd Garrison in his campaign for freedom; Pelley's campaign was to free America from economic bondage. This comparison is a theme that can be found in most of the earlier issues of Liberation.

The tone of the movement was largely set by Pelley and his writings, which can be divided into two groups. His books and some of his pamphlets are fairly moderate and idealistic in tone; although expressions of anti-Semitism are present, they form only a minor theme, unemotionally presented. The reading of his books, especially No More Hunger and Nations-In-Law, as well as his later spiritual works, gives an impression of scholarly idealism, tempered with concern for his fellow man.

¹⁶ Liberation IV:10 (June 24, 1933), p. 12.

This happy mood is slightly broken by the occasional anti-Semitic references, but they are mild compared to the diatribes in the magazine Liberation. These denounced the Jews in violent terms on every conceivable basis. There is a great contrast between Pelley the idealist and Pelley the agitator. It may be that the more violent of these articles were written by other members of the staff,¹⁷ but Pelley certainly allowed rather intemperate language to appear in his magazines.¹⁸ "I will be as harsh as Truth and as Uncompromising as Justice -- on this Subject I do not Care to Speak or Write with Moderation."¹⁹ This was another quotation from Garrison which appeared on the mast-head of The New Liberation.

The writing of Pelley was noteworthy from another standpoint: its quantity. It was estimated that by the spring of 1936 his collected works in manuscript would represent a nine-foot pile of paper.²⁰ He wrote great numbers of scripts and pamphlets in addition to his various magazines. (See appendix for partial list.) He was an extremely prolific writer, one of the factors which helped to distinguish him from the leaders of other such movements. Another talent with which he should be credited is organizational ability, building the Silver Shirts up to the strength it had. For although it was not of great force on the American scene, it was more sizable than any comparable group.²¹

¹⁷ This is the case presented by a former member of the Christian Party, in interview, 1964.

¹⁸ When I expressed this opinion, a former member of the Christian Party explained that the situation was so serious and the times were so bad that it was difficult to write with moderation.

¹⁹ Masthead, The New Liberation VII:1 (January 1937), p. 1.

²⁰ Pelley's Weekly I:16 (March 4, 1936), p. 3.

²¹ Editors of Fortune, Jews in America, p. 91.

A large part of this must be attributed to the force of Pelley's personality, as well as the appeal of his ideas and the quantity of his writing. For, on the whole, "the Silver-shirts as Silver-shirts are almost completely a personal following."²²

Pelley's distinctive physical appearance probably had something to do with his appeal as a leader. In his forties during the period of Silver Shirt activity, he had iron-gray hair, heavy black eyebrows and a white mustache and goatee. Behind rimless glasses, his eyes were sharp, penetrating, described by an unfriendly observer as "like living coals buried in a heap of ashes".²³ Often wearing the Silver Shirt uniform for meetings and speeches, he had an impressive appearance, despite the fact that he stood only five foot seven and weighed one hundred thirty pounds. He was credited with being a dynamic speaker; his voice, somewhat incongruously, had the accent of a New England Yankee.²⁴ He was described in a "Wanted" poster as "distinguished looking; good talker; highly educated."²⁵ Even George Anderson, testifying against Pelley before the Dies Committee, expressed a liking for him personally.²⁶ As much as by his personality, though, people were attracted by the appeal of his ideas. He offered a concrete program, a unified body of belief difficult to find elsewhere. People joined because they felt it provided answers to troublesome questions in life. For them, as for Pelley, the movement became a

²² Pelley, "The Cogitations", The New Liberation VII:1 (January 1937), p. 11.

²³ John Roy Carlson, Under Cover (New York, 1943), p. 399.

²⁴ Personal observation, from tape recording made of Pelley in 1956.

²⁵ "Wanted" poster for William Dudley Pelley, Buncombe County Sheriff's Office, 1939. Available in bound volume, N.C. v. Pelley.

²⁶ McCormack Committee Hearings, No. 73-D.C.-4, p. 254.

Crusade.

The number of people involved in this crusade is not known exactly. Estimates of the size and strength of the organization vary considerably, and there seems to have been little on which to base most of the estimates which were made. These ranged from seven hundred to "hundreds of thousands". George Anderson testified that when he left Pelley's employ in July, 1933, Pelley's organization had seven or eight hundred members spread throughout forty states.²⁷ Liberation gave no membership count but said there were units in twenty-seven states in the fall of 1933.²⁸ Pelley in his 1939 autobiography, however, writes that there were Silver Shirts in every state but Delaware at this time.²⁹ Before the Dies Committee in 1940, he testified that there were twelve states that had Silver Shirt organizations in 1934, and that there were around twenty-five thousand members.³⁰ Part of the confusion about the number of states organized may be due to the fact that there were individual Silver Shirts in states without any formal organizational structure, individuals who maintained contact with the movement primarily by receiving publications from Asheville. The number of members, based on a count of the copies of Liberation about to be sent out from the Asheville post office in the summer of 1933, was placed by one source at eighteen thousand.³¹ On the basis of some unnamed evidence allegedly presented to the House Rules Committee,

27 McCormack Committee Hearings, No. 73-D.C.-4, pp. 253, 260.

28 Liberation V:4 (September 16, 1933), p. 7.

29 Pelley, Door, p. 420.

30 Dies Committee Hearings, p. 7209.

31 Milton S. Mayer, "Unmasking the Silver Shirts", Real America III:4 (June, 1934), p. 13.

Representative Lehlbach of New Jersey told the House of Representatives that there were "hundreds of thousands" of Silver Shirts throughout the country.³² This figure was probably excessive, as were the later organizational goal of "One Million Silvershirts By 1939",³³ and a member's statement to the F.B.I. that there were three and a half million in the United States.³⁴

The geographical distribution of Silver Shirt membership and activity can be determined with somewhat greater certainty, for some areas were more noticeably organized than others. The largest concentration seemed to have been in the West, although at times there were also groups significant enough to be considered newsworthy in Illinois,³⁵ Ohio,³⁶ Pennsylvania,³⁷ and Massachusetts.³⁸ The South was not particularly active,³⁹ though some anti-Silver Shirt writers, trying to draw comparisons with the Ku Klux Klan, asserted that the "Bible Belt" was a stronghold.⁴⁰ Membership in the Asheville area, Pelley's home and the headquarters of the movement for the entire seven years of its existence, was "almost non-existent".⁴¹ The highest concentration of Silver Shirt activity was found on the Pacific Coast, particularly in Washington and California. Other parts of the

³² Congressional Record, 73rd Congress, 2nd Session, House, p. 4941.

³³ Liberation VIII:20 (March 28, 1938); also the title of a Silvershirt pamphlet.

³⁴ Letter from member in Indiana to Silvershirt Headquarters, printed in "Our Political Police" (Asheville, 1939), p. 50.

³⁵ New York Times, November 29, 1938, p. 10.

³⁶ New York Times, October 7, 1938, p. 1.

³⁷ New York Times, November 16, 1938, p. 13.

³⁸ Series of articles in Boston American, September, 1933, cited in Liberation.

³⁹ Strong, Organized Anti-Semitism, p. 51

⁴⁰ E.g., Mayer, "Unmasking the Silver Shirts", p. 13.

⁴¹ Willis Thornton, "Silver Shirt Forces Meet Difficulties", Asheville Citizen, April 29, 1934.

country also had members, though they were often not particularly conspicuous.

The distinctive uniform was a feature of membership in the Silver Legion that may have attracted some to the organization. The wearing of a silver-gray shirt with the scarlet "L" over the heart gave a heightened feeling of participation in the movement. There was also a white Liberation banner, also with the red "L", which provided a further symbol of unity for the group. Despite these trappings, however, the Silver Legion apparently rejected much of the ballyhoo that is generally a part of "Shirt" organizations. Liberation stated that "it does not seek to parade in order to play at soldiers. It solicits no members for the fun of dressing in unusual uniforms and helmets, ducking aliens in horsetroughs, or giving the Roman salute in formation."⁴² Despite this stated policy, it is likely that many were attracted to the Silver Legion by trappings that were certainly a part of it. The interest of most members went deeper than this, especially those involved in the more spiritual aspects of the movement.

There was a large amount of overlap between those interested in Pelley's metaphysical works and those in the political activities of the Silver Shirts. Pelley estimated that nearly all those concerned with the spiritual aspects were also supporters of the Silver Shirts as a political organization, although the reverse was not true. Some who entered the Silver Legion for its practical program came eventually to believe in the metaphysical ideas

⁴² "Leadership in this Crisis Must be Utterly Sincere", Liberation IV:14 (July 22, 1933), p. 5.

underlying it all. (Roy Zachary was one of these.⁴³) Others were deeply involved in both. Malcom Moore, who ran for Governor of Washington on the Christian Party ticket in 1936,⁴⁴ had been listed as the leader of a Liberation Assembly as far back as 1931.⁴⁵ Many members, however, saw the Silver Shirts as providing a strictly temporal solution to certain economic and political problems.

The motives of those who joined are hard to determine. There was a strong current of idealism, of deep commitment to a cause, that influenced many members, especially those believing in the spiritual aspects of the movement. They conceived of it as a struggle for Right. The ideal of social justice and equal economic opportunity also enters into this, and it seems to have influenced many.⁴⁶ Others joined on more practical grounds. To some, it presented a strong bastion against the threat of Communism. Others saw it as a hope for relief of the economic misery of the Depression; it was one of the several unusual economic plans that were being advocated during this period. People looking for some solution would go from meeting to meeting, from one organization to another, often over the entire political spectrum, hoping to find a workable answer.⁴⁷ Such

⁴³ Interview, former member of Christian Party, 1964.

⁴⁴ State of Washington, Abstract of Votes Polled at General Election, 1936, p. 45.

⁴⁵ The New Liberator 11:2 (July, 1931), p. vii.

⁴⁶ Personal observation, based on conversations with people associated with the movement. It seems difficult to the outside observer to reconcile anti-Semitism with this idealism, but the members were able to do it, viewing the Jew as opposed to all the things they idealized.

⁴⁷ Based on interview with man who attended Silver Shirt and other meetings in the 1930's, seeking a solution to the Depression. Interview, 1964. Hereafter referred to as Mr. L.

people generally had no strong political or racial prejudices; it was only when an explanation of the situation "made sense" to them that they would accept what might be considered intolerant or prejudiced ideas. This may largely explain the role of anti-Semitism among the rank-and-file of the Silver Shirts. There was an inclination to affix the blame on someone, not to find something for which to blame the Jews. "It didn't matter to me whether it was the Jews or the Swedes who were causing the Depression and supporting Communism."⁴⁸ This statement was made in conversation by a man who became interested in the Silver Shirts but did not join. It reflects the attitude of many of those who became involved with the movement.

These people were sometimes associated in some way or another with other organizations of the period. A woman in Oregon running for the state legislature announced her support of Pelley, the Townsend movement, the Grange Measures, and lower cost milk.⁴⁹ Roy Zachary had been Washington State organizer for Coin Harvey (the old free-silverite) and his Liberty Party.⁵⁰ A Massachusetts reader of Liberation wrote to Headquarters commenting favorably on the Townsend Plan and on Father Coughlin's Social Justice.⁵¹ There were also some of German descent who were involved in the activities of the German-American Bund as well as those of the Silver Shirts, though their number does not seem to

⁴⁸ Interview, Mr. L., 1964.

⁴⁹ Ariel Burton Pomeroy, statement in Pelley's Weekly, October 21, 1936, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Pelley, Door, p. 471; other Silver Shirts had also been involved with the Liberty Party. Interview, former member of Christian Party, 1964.

⁵¹ Letter, quoted in "Our Political Police" (Asheville, 1939) (Title a reference to the F.B.I.).

have been large. These subjects, as they relate to the issue of inter-organizational links, will be treated more fully in the next chapter.

It is difficult to determine the composition of the membership in terms of age, occupation, national origin, and personal traits. It has been claimed that the organization was largely a group of malcontents, drifters, and misfits, along with activist window breakers. There was a certain element of this type in the movement, as at least one former member admitted, but this former member insisted that the misfits were a distinct minority.⁵² In general, the Silver Shirts were not misfits in any economic or social sense, though their ideas were somewhat far afield. Apparently it was generally a middle-class movement; Donald Strong in Organized Anti-Semitism in America lists as typical members Protestant clergymen, lawyers, physicians, salesmen, an electrician, an accountant, a restaurant proprietor, a drama teacher, an ex-legislator, an ex-sheriff, and an architect.⁵³ Former members of the movement deny that it was only representative of any one social class and maintain that they formed a cross-section of society. A newspaper account of a Silver Shirt meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, stated that "the audience was about 25 per cent white collar, about 25 per cent under 50 years of age, and from the study of shoes and hands of the people . . . most of them earn a meager living with plenty of sweat of the

⁵² Interview, 1964, with former member of Christian Party, who said that only two people in their local unit could be classified as really peculiar -- one a shell-shocked soldier, the other a publicity-seeking trouble-maker nicknamed "Two Gun" Clark.

⁵³ Strong, Organized Anti-Semitism, p. 53.

brow."⁵⁴ But most sources tend to agree with Strong's estimation of the Silver Shirt membership as primarily middle class.⁵⁵ It also seems to have been principally middle-aged, as indicated in the newspaper account. This was stated by people formerly associated with the movement,⁵⁶ and is implicit in Pelley's account of the organization after 1935.⁵⁷ Apparently many of the California members in 1933 and 1934 were more youthful, but this phase of the organization faded.

In national origin, the members were mostly old-stock Americans, although Oklahoma organizer Luther Powell had stated late in 1933 that German-Americans formed the "backbone" of the organization.⁵⁸ (Of the names on the 1936 Christian Party ticket in Washington, most seemed to be old American names of English origin). There was a certain element of nativism in this group, as demonstrated by the Connecticut woman who wrote a letter decrying the wave of immigration coming to the United States. She asked if there was any hope for "pure-bred American young people", and offered her services "to help rid our country of every foreign parasite and presumptuous, arrogant intruder."⁵⁹ This may not be representative of the movement as a whole, but at least it indicates the attitude of some who found expression in it.

⁵⁴ "Silver Shirt Leader Poses -- But Insists It's Un-American" Minneapolis Times, October 29, 1938.

⁵⁵ For example, Arthur M. Schlessinger, Jr., The Politics of Upheaval (Boston, 1960), p. 69.

⁵⁶ Interviews with former member of Christian Party and Mr. L., 1964.

⁵⁷ Pelley, Door, p. 471f.

⁵⁸ Quoted by James L. Kilgallen, INS story, in Los Angeles Herald and Express, October 11, 1933.

⁵⁹ Letter to the editor, The Silver Legion Ranger 1:8 (January 17, 1934), pp. 5-8.

Also indicative of the general trend of thought of the members, especially those interested in the spiritual aspects, are certain other ideas and interests which many shared. Health foods, flying saucers, naturopathic medicine, telepathic communication, spiritualism,* and astrology* -- all these can be found as common interests of a large group of those who were once associated with the Silver Shirts.⁶⁰

Ideas like these could have played a part in keeping many conventionally-minded people from joining, even though other aspects of the movement appealed to them. These who doubted Pelley's mystical powers often doubted his whole purpose, though many non-believers did become members. This factor, combined with the bad publicity received by the Silver Shirts, may have frightened away people who would otherwise have been in accord with the group. Consequently Pelley gained only a relatively small personal following; this following was intensely loyal to Pelley and his ideas, in fact devoted to him. They were, and are, adamant in the support of their beliefs and the defense of their position as one of genuine patriotism. They were shocked and indignant that they should be considered subversive, subject to investigation by the F.B.I. and condemnation by the country they were trying to save.⁶¹ The conflicting concepts that they and the general public held about the movement were irreconcilable.

*This does not include the corrupted commercial forms of these subjects -- a distinction made by a former member of the Christian Party, interview, 1964.

⁶⁰ Interview, former member of Christian Party.

⁶¹ A good sense of members' feelings on this subject can be obtained by reading the letters in "Our Political Police" (Available NYPL).

The public tended to think of the Silver Shirts as part of a Nazi conspiracy to conquer the United States, somehow linked with all the right-wing and vigilante type organizations in the country. This concept, and other public reactions to the movement, will be examined more closely.

Chapter Six: The Outside World

General public awareness of the Silver Shirt movement was an important factor in determining their significance. The reaction to them and their relations with other groups in the United States and abroad contributed to the formation of the popular concept of them. These things must be considered before a complete picture can emerge. It was probably the treatment they received in the press that most helped to shape their image and create public concern.

From the first, national press coverage of the movement was unfavorable, though slight. Newspaper and magazines usually either ignored the Silver Shirts or made them appear either ridiculous or dangerous. Syndicated columnist Walter Winchell had first mentioned them in April, 1933, as "a form of the Ku Klux Klan".¹ It was not until after the move to Oklahoma City that real attention was paid to the organization. There James L. Kilgallen, a reporter for International News Service, interviewed Luther Powell of the Silver Rangers, then wrote a series of articles giving a fairly objective account of the organization and its beliefs.² Pelley expressed approval of these articles, though he maintained his policy of having "no statement to make" to the press, which he felt distorted the movement's ideas.³ An editorial based on the Kilgallen articles in the Chicago American denounced the Silver Shirts, comparing

¹ Quoted in Liberation IV:3 (May 6, 1933), p. 4.

² Appeared in many newspapers in October 1933. For example, The Los Angeles Herald and Express, October 11, 17, 1933.

³ Liberation V:12 (November 11, 1933), p. 4; Liberation V:7 (October 7, 1933), p. 12.

them to the Ku Klux Klan. The editorial went on to say "you cannot organize ignorance, envy, prejudice and hate without bringing on sickening explosions."⁴ This was the general approach of those papers which commented on the movement at this time.

The first significant magazine account of the Silver Shirts appeared in The New Republic late in 1933, in an article entitled "American Fascism in Embryo". This considered several groups whose economic programs seemed to indicate Fascist tendencies. Pelley was reported to be keeping "in close touch with Hitler's representatives."⁵ This was the beginning of a new dimension in the public reaction to the Silver Shirts. Soon after this, a series of articles called "Hitlerism in America" appeared in the magazine Today. These articles began with an examination of the apparent German government sponsorship of the Friends of the New Germany in this country and the threat that such a group posed. In later articles, the Silver Shirts were introduced. Their propaganda, it was stated, showed many German influences. Moreover, they allegedly cooperated with the Friends of the New Germany. No direct link with Nazi Germany was shown, but the implied tie-up of the Silver Shirts with the Friends of the New Germany and from there to the Hitler regime seemed rather ominous.⁶ The New Republic soon extended this approach in an article presenting Pelley as a crafty agent for big business.

⁴ "Bigotry on the March Again", Chicago American, October 21, 1933.

⁵ "American Fascism in Embryo", New Republic LXXVII: 195 (December 27, 1933), pp. 185-187.

⁶ Samuel Duff McCoy, "Hitlerism in America", Today 1:23, 24, 25 (March 31, April 7, 14, 1934).

"inflaming a potential army of hooligans" to break strikes. He also was accused of having begun the Silver Shirts not with mystical inspiration but "after certain terrestrial conversations with Nazi agents."⁷

The bankruptcy of Galahad Press received brief treatments in two national news magazines, Time and Newsweek, which presented the movement as an insolvent "shirt business" with Nazi overtones.⁸ Also about this time the magazine Real America (put out by the publishers of Real Detective) carried a series of three articles of Pelley and the Silver Shirts which were presented as a racket comparable to the Ku Klux Klan. The author decided there was no actual link with the Nazis, though a partial ideological once existed. A notable feature of this series was the creation of marionettes designed to represent Pelley and Hitler. Photographs of the Pelley puppet and the Hitler puppet were featured on the cover of the June issue and throughout the subsequent articles. The general tone of the writing was one of mild ridicule; no particular danger was seen in the movement, especially after it had been apparently destroyed by bankruptcy.⁹

Members of the United States Congress had also taken note of the Silver Shirts by this time. Concerned mostly with Nazi propaganda activities, they had begun discussion late in 1933 of the possible investigation of groups that seemed to be furthering the German cause in this country. Representative Samuel Dickstein,

⁷ Arthur Graham, "Crazy like a Fox", New Republic LXXVII:101 (April 18, 1934), pp. 264-266.

⁸ Time, May 7, 1934, pp. 16-17; Newsweek, June 2, 1934, p. 8.

⁹ Milton S. Mayer, series of three articles, Real America III:4,5,6 (June, July, August, 1934). Available NYPL.

Democrat of New York, made radio addresses in October and December, 1933, concerning this subject.¹⁰ He was the sponsor of the bill which, when passed in 1934, authorized the formation of a Special Committee on Un-American Activities to investigate "Nazi and certain other propaganda activities."¹¹ This body, known as the McCormack Committee for its chairman, John McCormack of Massachusetts, was voted into existence on March 20, 1934.¹² Its investigation, lasting several months, looked into the affairs of the Communist Party, as well as the Silver Shirts, but concentrated mostly on the Friends of the New Germany, later the German-American Bund, which seemed to be most active in spreading Nazi propaganda.¹³ In investigating Silver Shirt affairs, the committee relied largely on the testimony of former members of the movement and on material seized at Asheville headquarters.¹⁴ The testimony before the Committee concerning the alleged drilling of Silver Shirts in preparation for seizing San Diego created a sensation in Southern California newspapers.¹⁵ After this brief flare-up, little was written on the Silver Shirts until Pelley's trial in January, 1935. This received limited but adequate coverage;¹⁶ it was the last significant article to appear on the Silver Shirts for several years.

The twenty-four page report of the McCormack Committee to the House of Representatives was issued early in 1935. After

¹⁰ Congressional Record, 73rd Congress, 2nd Session, House of Representatives, pp. 1029-1032.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 4934.

¹² Ibid., p. 4949.

¹³ McCormack Committee Hearings, passim.

¹⁴ Ibid.; Pelley, Door, p. 477.

¹⁵ Los Angeles Herald and Express, August 7, 1934; San Diego Tribune, August 8, 1934.

¹⁶ For example, New York Times, January 23, 1935, p. 5.

considering Nazi propaganda activities (the Friends of the New Germany) and Fascist activities, the report listed the Silver Shirts under the heading "Other". This gave a brief one-page summary of Silver Shirt activity and concluded that it was one of several groups which were "petty rackets" -- "unAmerican . . . and created and operated for the financial welfare of those who guide them and do not hesitate to stoop to racial and religious intolerance in order to achieve their selfish purposes." Any possible Fascist implications were disregarded. The question of German contact was dealt with briefly, involving one incident when a Silver Shirt arranged a meeting between Pelley and an official of a German steamship line. The McCormack Committee did not seem to consider the Silver Shirts any great threat to the national security.¹⁷

In 1936, the idea of the Silver Shirts as menaces cropped up again. A Seattle woman complained to the police that there was an armed camp of them in a near-by small town. The police investigated and found nothing to substantiate this,¹⁸ although this town was the location of a Silver Shirt building called the Silver Lodge.¹⁹ Also about this time a minor Seattle tabloid ran banner headlines crying "Pelleyites Get Guns", apparently based on Roy Zachary's purchase of a hunting rifle from a local

¹⁷ U. S. Congress. House. Investigation of Nazi and Other Propaganda. House Report 153, 74th Congress, 1st Session (1935).

¹⁸ Seattle Times, September 27, 1936, p. 5.

¹⁹ Personal observation. The building was constructed to house members of the 1936 Cavalcade. It was subsequently used as a meeting place for the Silver Shirts and later as the community's town hall. (Interview, former member of Christian Party, 1964).

gunshop.²⁰ The major Seattle newspapers, however, gave no coverage to Silver Shirt activities in 1936, beyond the incident of the alleged "armed camp".

Sinclair Lewis' book It Can't Happen Here, published in 1935, reflected the influence of a certain popular attitude toward the Silver Shirts. Lewis' fictional American dictator Berzelius Windrip is called "The Chief"; Windrip also makes a favorable reference to Pelley as one of his sources of inspiration.²¹ In many ways, Windrip is more like Huey Long than Pelley; there are not a great many parallels with the Silver Shirt program, and Windrip has none of Pelley's metaphysical approach. The book was a general denunciation of all American Fascist tendencies, in which Pelley's movement is included.

There was little publicity on the Silver Shirts for several years after this. It was not until Roy Zachary began his cross-country speaking tour in 1938 that attention was again paid to the movement. Again the accounts were unfavorable, perhaps more strongly so than previously. The changing international scene, with Hitler looming as an increasing threat to freedom and world peace, resulted in a changed view of the Silver Shirts and their activities. There was a greater concern with possible native Nazis who would aid Germany in the event of war or who might try to seize control of the American government. Though the Silvershirts had not changed their stated opposition to revolution, the admiration Pelley and Zachary expressed for many

²⁰ "Guns for Silvershirts is Cry of Seattle Jews", Pelley's Weekly, September 30, 1936, p. 1.

²¹ Sinclair Lewis, It Can't Happen Here (New York, 1935), p. 74.

of Hitler's policies increasingly disturbed many people. Thus the Silverhirts were among the many right-wing organizations investigated by the newly-formed Dies Committee, the Special House Committee on UnAmerican Activities, in 1938 and thereafter.

The Dies Committee probed several groups, relying mostly on the testimony of its investigator John C. Metcalfe, who had spent six months examining some fifty-three of them.²² His testimony was alternated with the presentation of evidence regarding Communist activities, over a period of four months in late 1938. The German-American Bund had received most of his attention, though he spent a large part of his time on other organizations, including the Silverhirts and George Deatherage's Knights of the White Camellia. There was a tendency on his part to link the various groups to each other, both in ideological and in practical terms. Only the German-American Bund was viewed as specifically a potential source of spies and espionage agents.²³ Yet the interconnections of the different organizations appeared threatening. Metcalfe later spoke of a great overlap of membership between the Bund and the Silverhirts.²⁴ This idea, as well as the identification of much of the organizations' propaganda as of German origin, contributed to a greater concern on the part of the general public.

Newspaper coverage of Dies Committee testimony formed the bulk of the accounts of the Silverhirts in the late 1930's, along with reports of some of Zachary's speeches and the disturbances occasionally accompanying them. In the spring of

²² Dies Committee Hearings, p. 2237.

²³ Ibid., p. 3025.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 3945.

1939, the Saturday Evening Post carried a major article entitled "Star Spangled Fascists", featuring capsule sketches of men such as Pelley, Fritz Kuhn, George Deatherage, Gerald Winrod, George Christians, and Father Coughlin. The article used as a theme the "search for a man on horseback" to lead a united Fascist movement and predicted that even without such a leader American Fascists could constitute a threat to the safety of the United States, especially in case of economic collapse.²⁵ This portrayal contributed to the general attitude of concern that was being generated about such groups.

Dies Committee testimony continued to receive newspaper coverage, and the name of Pelley and the Silvershirts appeared frequently. Pelley's legal troubles in North Carolina received full coverage in the New York Times, as did his 1942 sedition trial, which was national news. He had achieved "nation-wide prominence". The Dies Committee was concerned enough to spend "more money on the investigation and subsequently assisting in the prosecution of Pelley than any other single individual Nazi, Fascist, or Communist which it has investigated."²⁶ In its 1940 report, the Dies Committee had concluded that Pelley was "a racketeer engaged in mulching thousands of dollars annually from his fanatical and misled followers and credulous people all over the United States"²⁷ The Committee had also stated

²⁵ Stanley High, "Star Spangled Fascists", Saturday Evening Post CCXI:48 (May 27, 1939), pp. 5-7, 70-71.

²⁶ Jerry Voorhis, Extension of Remarks, Congressional Record (reprint), 77th Congress, 2nd Session, September 3, 1942. Available in bound volume of N. C. v. Pelley, 1942.

²⁷ U. S. Congress. House. Investigation of UnAmerican Propaganda Activities in the United States. House Report 1476. 76th Congress, 3rd Session.

its opposition to anti-Semitism and other forms of "race hatred". In none of the Committee reports was Pelley designated as anything more serious than a promoter of these doctrines, though the possible weakening of American morale to which such propaganda could contribute was recognized.

As wartime tensions increased, people became more violent in their denunciations of German sympathizers. In Asheville, where local citizens had long been hostile to Pelley's activities, a newspaper editorial calling for his arrest appeared, arguing that "He Needs A Lesson". "This crackpot needs to learn that in the courts of this land is a power that takes no account of his Hitlerian pretensions and that treats him like any other person who violates the laws."²⁸ This sort of response was fairly typical. Articles such as "Star Spangled Fascists" helped create the impression that several right-wing organizations were working together in cooperation with the German government to set up an American Nazi regime. The sensational best-seller Under Cover, published in 1943, furthered this notion in its portrayal of several groups, including the Silver-shirts, as forming a great menace to the country.²⁹ This same attitude resulted in the 1944 mass sedition trial of thirty rightist leaders and writers. There is a certain justification for seeing some sort of link, but it seems to have been greatly overemphasized.

The major point of unity of the various groups was in their common opposition to the imagined Jewish-Communist conspiracy. Because of this, they often attracted similar types of members,

²⁸ "He Needs A Lesson", Asheville Citizen, October 15, 1941.

²⁹ John Roy Carlson, Under Cover (New York, 1943).

and there was a certain amount of membership overlap.³⁰ They also would sell each other's literature and speak at each other's meetings. At the same time, however, there was a competition for members among the various organizations,³¹ and this cooperation would not be carried too far. In the case of the Silvershirts, especially, their programs differed substantially. The German-American Bund generally followed the Nazi "party line", while followers of Gerald Winrod, for example, were more a part of a nativist American fundamentalism.³² Pelley expressed disagreement with both Kuhn and Winrod at various times because of these things. Pelley was probably most closely associated with George Deatherage and James True,³³ but even they had little more than a commercial relationship, involving the sale of literature to each other. Some of the statements made by people such as Zachary would indicate a closer connection than actually existed with other groups.³⁴ Plans for actual unity, such as George Deatherage's American Nationalist Confederation, never materialized. It may be possible that a very secret sort of conspiracy, of which no evidence came to light, existed among the various groups. This is, however, rather unlikely.

³⁰ Metcalfe testimony, Dies Committee Hearings, p. 3945; letter, Joseph Roos to author, November 23, 1964.

³¹ Interview with former member of Christian Party, 1964; Donald Strong says the same sort of thing in Organized Anti-Semitism.

³² Sometimes Winrod's fundamentalism outweighed his anti-Semitism; he predicted on Biblical grounds that 144,000 of the Chosen Elect on Judgment Day will be Jews. (Noted with disdain in Liberation VIII:7 (November 21, 1937), p. 12.

³³ Both mentioned favorably on occasion in Liberation; also relation brought out in Dies Committee Hearings, pp. 2342, 2343.

³⁴ Zachary specified as responsible for this sort of impression by former Christian Party member, interview, 1964.

The question of Silver Shirt relation to foreign governments can be seen primarily on ideological grounds. That there was no working link, that Pelley was not an agent for the Nazis, is fairly well established; however, the implications of certain other relations cannot be overlooked. It was this problem which created such widespread public concern about the Silver Shirts.

If an actual physical connection had existed between Pelley and Nazi Germany, it seems that concrete evidence to this effect would have been brought out in one of the Congressional hearings or at the 1942 and 1944 sedition trials. This was not done. George Anderson, former treasurer of the Foundation for Christian Economics, testified that Pelley had attempted to enlist German financial support for the Silver Shirts and failed.³⁵ Even this alleged attempt may not be true. Anderson was telling all the worst he knew about the movement at the time and certainly would have mentioned any Nazi connection.

The only apparent direct communication between Germany and Pelley's organization involved the exchange of propaganda literature. Lawrence Brown, Pelley's assistant in charge of editorial research, received material from the German information service, Fichtebund.³⁶ This material was used occasionally in Liberation to present the side of Germany not shown by the general American press. Beyond this, the only observable German contact was of a personal nature, as Pelley and some of his staff exchanged letters with some German citizens. Any other links

³⁵ McCormack Committee Hearings, No. 73-D.C.-4, p. 235.

³⁶ N. C. v. Pelley, 1942; sample Fichtebund press releases included in the bound volume of the case.

were almost purely ideological.

Pelley often expressed admiration for what he saw as Hitler's work in freeing Germany from the oppressive yoke of international Jewry. Except for this, Pelley did not praise Hitler's political or economic program. The New Germany was thought good because the Jews were under control, not necessarily because of Hitler's administration per se. An article in The New Liberation was entitled "Germany, Jew Purged, Becomes Ideal Country."³⁷ This was the main point of common concern of the Silver Shirts and Hitler Germany. Yet even beyond this, Pelley seemed to identify himself and his cause with Hitler. The fact that he launched the Silver Shirts the day after Hitler's rise to power has probably been overemphasized in every popular account of the movement, but it does have a certain significance. Although Pelley related that the 1929 prophecy had said "his work is not as yours" and that this was (merely) a "time signal",³⁸ many articles in Liberation spoke of Hitler as if he were conducting a crusade in Germany similar to that of Pelley in the United States. Each crusade was adapted to the needs of the individual nation. Hitler was credited with being guided by "transcendental sources"³⁹ -- just as Pelley was.

"Nazism is a pure-bred people directing their own institutions without interference by the parasitical or predatory Jew."⁴⁰ Beyond

³⁷ The New Liberation VIII:7 (November 21, 1937), pp. 6-8.

³⁸ Pelley, Door, p. 337; also quoted to me by a former member of the Christian Party, emphasizing that Pelley and Hitler were not allied.

³⁹ "Does Hitler have Mentors Directing his Policies?" Liberation IV:1 (April 22, 1933), pp. 5-6.

⁴⁰ The New Liberation VII:12 (September 21, 1937), p. 7.

this, Pelley expressed no particular interest in or approval of the Nazi regime, except to say he did not favor dictatorship. Pelley remained proud of being an American; he published the letter of a German stating that Pelley could not be a Nazi, because there was something German about being a Nazi.⁴¹ Pelley also denied that his program was Fascism, or that he was a Fascist, "meaning one who endorses a political dictatorship. But if Fascism is to be interpreted as Jews interpret it, namely anti-Semitism openly and politically expressed, yes, I'm a Fascist."⁴² This was not Pelley's definition. As he interpreted it, "Fascism is the Corporate State absolutely dominated by the will of the one autocrat -- so long as he can keep his popularity and power."⁴³ The Corporate State of Mussolini was not the same as an incorporated United States, which would maintain free elections by popular plebescite. The people would be guided by spiritually aware leaders, but supposedly according to a higher purpose than the whims of a materialistic autocrat. As Pelley conceived of Hitler as such a leader for Germany, so he seemed to conceive of himself as a leader for the United States. This was never openly stated, but it does not appear to be too great a conclusion to make; the implications of it are present throughout his works. He did not intend to institute Hitlerism in America, nor to become an American Hitler. But he hoped to be to America as Hitler was to Germany: not a dictator, but a savior.

41 Pelley's Weekly II:21, October 7, 1936, p. 5.

42 Pelley's Weekly I:23, April 22, 1936, p. 4.

43 "Will Mussolini become the Wooden Horse inside the Walls of a Nazi Troy?", The New Liberation VII:12 (September 21, 1937), p. 6.

Pelley felt a spiritual identification with Hitler, and an economic kinship with the government of Japan. He claimed that No More Hunger had been translated into Japanese and that its system had been adopted by Japan.⁴⁴ However, a Japanese source describes the program outlined in the book, translated and printed in Tokyo in 1941, as having only superficial similarities to the economic policies of the time.⁴⁵ In any case, Pelley did feel an interest in the more strictly temporal affairs of Japan; he gave far more attention to its program of territorial expansion than he did to Germany's campaign for lebensraum.

The many similarities that existed between the Silver Shirt and Nazi ideologies cannot be denied. Yet there were some interesting and significant differences that distinguish the Silver Shirts. The projected popular plebescite on major legislation,⁴⁶ concern with individual realization of spiritual progression -- these were in conflict with the Nazi dominance of the masses by the state. However, Pelley tends somewhat toward this leadership mystique in Nations-In-Law, with his concept of the Social Mind and the necessity of the existence of society for full self-realization. Yet the concept of totalitarianism was specifically rejected by Pelley and his followers. Perhaps they could have been led to believe in it as a necessary evil, if conditions seemed sufficiently bad; but there was not the glorification of the state as such in the Silver Shirt

⁴⁴ The Liberation Scripts, "The Twenty-Second Script -- The Foundation Message". Available NYPL.

⁴⁵ Letter, Hiroshi Ueyama to author, February 18, 1965. The book, which had only one printing, was called Uenaki Seikatsu, literally "The Life Without Hunger".

⁴⁶ See No More Hunger, pp. 5-7.

philosophy. In the late 1930's Pelley specifically called for government "non-interference with the activities of citizens."⁴⁷ Because of their sensational nature at the time, public reaction probably overemphasized the opinions Pelley expressed regarding Hitler. There was no great stress placed on the subject in Pelley's publications. Treatment of specific American issues dominated most of his writing.

Whatever the elements of similarity with Nazi ideology, the Silver Shirts consciously rejected the idea that theirs was other than an American program. The extreme nationalistic spirit in Silver Shirt thought precluded the direct borrowing of a foreign system of government. This nationalism expressed itself in a conservative isolationism and a determination to stay out of foreign entanglements everywhere. Such an attitude would not consciously allow the propagation of an obviously foreign philosophy in this country. The Silver Shirt conception of themselves as fighters for Americanism was in conflict with it.

Public opinion held otherwise. The view of the Silver Shirts as possible overthrowers of the government was a fairly common one. The Silver Shirts themselves protested such a thought for they conceived of themselves as primarily idealists and preservers of law and order. An illustration of these two opposing concepts can be found in a mis-recording of testimony before the Dies Committee, where Pelley's autobiography The Door to Revelation is designated as "The Door to Revolution".⁴⁸ The only revolution which the Silver Shirts anticipated was a

⁴⁷ The Weekly Liberation VIII:20 (March 28, 1938), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Dies Committee Hearings, p. 7207.

Communist revolution, at which time they and other loyal Americans would fight back to save their country. Only then would Silver Shirt guns come into use.⁴⁹

The last few years of the Silver Shirts were significant largely because of public reaction to the group. Fearing Nazis everywhere as war with Germany drew perceptibly closer, people considered native extremist groups with greater concern. This concern made the Silver Shirts seem a greater threat than they actually were, certainly greater than they considered themselves to be. The arrest and trial of Pelley was the culmination of these public attitudes that had earlier found expression in the Dies Committee investigations. From viewing them as "money cranks" or "a re-organized Ku Klux Klan", popular opinion as represented in the press developed to a point of real fear of the Silver Shirts as Nazis. To alleviate this, Pelley had to be locked up. Public attention could then be focused elsewhere. Had there been no Nazi Germany, this attention would not have been directed, at least in the form it took, at the Silver Shirts.

49 Pelley's Weekly, October 14, 1936, p. 1.

Conclusions and Epilogue

The Silver Shirts were primarily an American product of the Depression, modified by ideas that, if not specifically American, were not specifically non-American either. Elements from the country's past, more than just the flag-waving that was obviously apparent, were important in their doctrines. The concept of an economic conspiracy had been current during earlier times of depression in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the Silver Shirts incorporated it to explain the Depression of the 1930's. That this Depression was more serious than all those past may have caused the greater intensity of feeling. The Silver Shirts focused this feeling on to the Jews, whom they considered responsible.

It has been said that the adherents of such a doctrine of anti-Semitism are people who are inadequate in dealing with life and unable to recognize their own shortcomings. To compensate for this, they seek someone on whom to blame their troubles and then concentrate their efforts on fighting this chosen enemy.¹ Under normal conditions, this explanation may be largely true. The Depression, however, created a situation in which normally adequate and capable people found themselves in serious difficulties through no fault of their own, where the entire economy seemed to have suffered a critical blow. No explanation for this was readily available. It seemed unreasonable that such a cataclysm could be part of a natural economic process. Under such circumstances, many people sought a cause, some accusing the

¹ Interview with Joseph Roos, Executive Director, Community Relations Committee of Los Angeles, 1964.

Hoover administration and others fixing on international bankers. A personification of the system was sought, a representative on whom could be pinned the distress of those who demanded an explanation. The money supply was an all-important factor to some; remembering the traditional identification of money powers with the Jews, it was but a simple step to the anti-Semitism of the Silver Shirt movement.

American nativism, which had appeared in strong waves before in the nation's history, also played a role in the Silver Shirt movement. Foreign influences were distrusted, and aliens and Jews were suspect as revolutionaries. The changing times that had brought the Depression also brought threats to old American values and an apparent break-down in morals and traditional standards; this too was a frightening thing, and a cause was sought. Again, the blame was laid on what were seen as foreign influences, and specifically on the Jews. In this sense the Silver Shirts can be seen as inheritors of a tradition of belief that included the Know-Nothings, the American Protective Association, and the Ku Klux Klan, as well as many latter-day conservatives. But this was only a part of the picture.

Beyond these currents of American history manifesting themselves in the Silver Shirt movement, there was an ideological commitment, a spiritual fervor surrounding the cause. This sense of absolute Right was the dedication of a small minority of crusaders fighting overwhelming odds. And it was this feeling which could have justified the fears of many that the movement was totalitarian. Although there was never any advocacy of

totalitarianism, and indeed a positively stated opposition to it by Pelley and his followers, the deep commitment of the members was absolute. The importance of the cause was overpowering, a part of spiritual destiny. This sort of attitude cannot allow subversion to upset the Higher Plan, or deviation to weaken it. Those who disagree might be serving the ends of the enemy. Pelley did not say this, nor did his followers express open belief in it. It was certainly not the purpose of the Silver Shirts to promote autocracy, nor would autocracy have necessarily resulted from a carrying out of their program. More likely would have been a sort of theocracy, or ideocracy. Perhaps none of the members realized that tendencies existed which pointed toward a possible totalitarianism. Most believed that they were engaged in a struggle for Americanism as they conceived of it, free from "predatory influences". Despite its widely-publicized anti-Semitic aspects, this program in itself was not the principal danger, any more than were apparent doctrinal similarities with the Nazis; it was the complete dedication and crusade-like qualities of the movement, whatever it advocated, that raises these fears.

Yet the movement as such posed no real physical danger to internal security. Even if it had advocated violent overthrow of the government, such a move could not have been successful. The Silver Shirts probably never numbered more than fifty thousand, and the members, many of them women, were generally past the age of youthful fighting trim. They might even have had trouble resisting the Communist revolution they foresaw as imminent. It

was not as a potential revolutionary force that the Silver Shirts were significant, nor as a vigilante organization, though this was closer to at least part of their own avowed purpose. Their economic programs made little dent on the consciousness of the American people, and their metaphysical ideas were ignored or dismissed as crackpot. The major influence that they had on American life in the view of contemporary writers was to provide color for sensational journalistic accounts and to serve as a focus for American fears of Nazi subversion. In a broader perspective, the Silver Shirts were significant for the way in which they incorporated elements from the American ~~past~~ past into a contemporary framework. More than this, the movement constituted an extreme protest against extreme conditions, conditions that sent many people in search of an explanation and a solution. It was in the Silver Shirts that some found what they sought.

* * * *

The ideas of the Silver Shirts did not disappear with the imprisonment of Pelley. After the end of the War, Pelley's son-in-law, Melford Pearson, published various leaflets and pamphlets defending him and calling for his release from prison. (Sample title: "Life Imprisonment for Exposing Communists".²) On February 14, 1950, Pelley was released on parole after serving over seven years of his fifteen year sentence.³ He returned to his home in Noblesville, Indiana, and successfully fought an attempt to return him to North Carolina for a prison term there.⁴

² Available in New York Public Library.

³ New York Times, February 15, 1950, p. 19.

⁴ New York Times, December 24, 1950, p. 15.

He soon began publishing material of a spiritual nature under the general name of Soulcraft. This included weekly scripts, several books, and a successive series of magazines, all dealing with metaphysical subjects, as well as a weekly tape recording.

Soulcraft study groups were established throughout the country. Refraining from any political writing, Pelley became acceptable enough to receive friendly treatment in a 1955 Associated Press "human interest" article about his new activities.⁵ A Professor of Religion from Boston University visited him and wrote a letter praising the spiritual comfort that Soulcraft doctrines had brought to thousands of people.⁶ In these years, Pelley enjoyed a certain amount of respectability that would not have been possible during the 1930's.

Toward the end of the decade, his health began to fail, and he published the last issue of his magazine Valor in 1962. He now lives in retirement in Noblesville. Soulcraft Chapels continues to sell his books and handle correspondence with a staff of two -- Pelley's wife⁷ and an assistant who first came to work for Pelley in 1936. There is still contact maintained with surviving former Silver Shirts throughout the country, particularly those who were more involved in the metaphysical aspects of the movement.⁸ Political writings are no longer a part of the material handled.

⁵ "Pelley Still Has Lot of Bounce", Asheville Citizen (Associated Press story), July 23, 1955.

⁶ Letter, G. Norman Eddy to William Dudley Pelley, 1957(?); shown to me by Mrs. Pelley.

⁷ She is the third Mrs. Pelley. As Miss A. Marion Henderson she was his secretary for many years; she received a suspended two-year sentence in the 1942 sedition trial.

⁸ Interview with Miss Herma Jeffries, 1964. Miss Jeffries is the assistant mentioned above.

In 1961 Pelley's son-in-law Melford Pearson published a revised edition of No More Hunger through his business, Aquila Press. He had been a member of the Silver Legion during the 1930's and now wanted to reach a new audience with the plan Pelley had originated then. The program presented in this new edition is essentially the same as in the old, except that references to Jews have been eliminated and statistics are brought up to date. It calls for the incorporation of the United States into a Christian Commonwealth, an economic system that is neither "Capitalism, Socialism, Fascism, or Communism".⁹ The plan is presented in detail, with far fewer spiritual overtones than in the original version. Aquila Press also since 1961 has published a monthly magazine, The Eagle's Eye, dedicated to the advancement of the No More Hunger plan.

The tone of presentation and the extent of activity differ greatly from those of the Silver Shirts of the 1930's. There is no organization supporting these ideas, only subscribers to The Eagle's Eye. There are no anti-Semitic references, only vague mentions of privilege and money powers. The spiritual ideas of Pelley do not enter into the plan; it is no longer presented as what is destined to be, but as a desirable and needed system. In many ways, it seems much more attractive than the program as Pelley originally proposed it. The elimination of the anti-Semitic trappings certainly has something to do with this.

Perhaps reading back into the past what they themselves feel today, spokesmen for the current No More Hunger plan deny that

⁹ Pelley, No More Hunger (Noblesville, 1961), p. 32.

Pelley or the Silver Shirts were actually anti-Semitic. They assert that Pelley "did indict a certain element in Jewry for exercising abnormal and disproportionate control",¹⁰ but that he was not really against Jews as such. This may be partly true, but it seemed from the reading of Pelley's magazines that the majority of Jews were in this "certain element", or at least supported it. Pelley openly proclaimed himself to be anti-Semitic.¹¹ In any case, those advocating the Christian Commonwealth plan today do not advocate anti-Semitism. Nor do they seem to have the air of crusaders out to save a nation. Those who believe in the Christian Commonwealth are convinced of its values and its feasibility, but it has become an economic program, not a spiritual crusade. There are touches of Utopian idealism about it as a cure for all social ills, yet it is viewed essentially as a practical program.

Thus has evolved the plan first projected by William Dudley Pelley in 1933. Changing times have brought a changed response.

¹⁰ Melford Pearson, "The Price of Truth" pamphlet (Noblesville, undated), p. 9.

¹¹ For example, when asked by a member of the Dies Committee "Are you anti-Semitic?", Pelley replied, "I would call myself very much so, Mr. Casey." Dies Committee Hearings. p. 7239.

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Joseph Roos, Los Angeles, August, 1964.

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Former member of Christian Party, State of Washington, August, December, 1964. Wishes to remain anonymous.

Appendix

Partial List of Pelley Pamphlets and Scripts

(Many of these were read as part of the research on this study. Although they have not all been directly cited in the text, they provided further insight into the thought of the movement.)

PAMPHLETS:

"After Dictators, What?"
"Applying Horse Sense to the Federal Mess"
"Can the American People be Fooled Again?"
"Cripples' Money"
"Dupes of Judah"
"45 Questions Most Frequently Asked About the Jews"
"Henry Ford Swims the Red Sea"
"The Hidden Empire"
"The Impeachment of Frances Perkins"
"Indians Aren't Red"
"The Key to Crisis"
"Martin Dies' Political Posse"
"Nostradamus--Seer and Prophet"
"Our Political Police"
"The President Said"
"The Suppressed Speech of Major General Van Horn Moseley"
"What Manner of Government is the Christ to Set Up?"
"What You Should Know about the Pelley Publications"
"Who Doped the Elephant?"
"Your Sacred Rights"

SCRIPTS:

The Pink Scripts
The Blue Lectures
The White Lectures
The Silver Scripts
The Golden Scripts (also available in book form)

Individual titles of many of these scripts are listed on the following two pages, copies of a Pelley circular promoting "The Valiant Doctrine".

Most of the pamphlets and scripts listed are available at the New York Public Library.

MOMENTOUS KNOWLEDGE

THAT CANNOT BE ESTIMATED IN DOLLARS

No adequate understanding of present-day problems and modern philosophical and religious trends can be had without a knowledge of certain underlying principles which are for the first time made available in the epochal Manuscripts listed below. No person, wondering as to why he came into life, the meaning of the environment in which he finds himself, or the true solutions to his personal problems, can afford to ignore the information here made available for his enlightenment.

THE PINK SCRIPTS

- # 1 What Man Seeks in Life
- 2 The Meaning of Adam's "Deep Sleep"
- 3 Holy Spirit and How It Creates
- 4 How Souls Came to this Planet
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Numbers 1 through 14 are now ready and additional ones are being issued one per week.

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WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY

